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Stakeholders' conceptions of quality in Distance Higher Education

Anne Jelfs BA (Hons), MSc

July 2004

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Technology



stakeholder groups emerged. These twelve concepts were: communication; credibility; pedagogy; convenience; system; challenge; cost; satisfaction; change; consistent; creative; and experience. The methodology is discussed in detail and its potential applicability to this type of research.

The research was able to highlight the differences some key stakeholders conceive as quality, whilst confirming the complexity of the notion of 'quality'. From the analysed data, it is suggested that quality assurance guidelines for DHE providers and assurers should include aspects of interaction and communication in the assessment of teaching quality.

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Chapter One - Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the thesis

This thesis offers a new application of established research approaches to researching stakeholders' conceptions of quality in distance higher education (DHE). The term 'distance higher education' has been adopted because it best reflected the type of education being researched: higher education delivered at a distance. This term includes full-time and part-time higher education (HE) study where part of the course or course support is provided electronically or as printed materials, and where there is a separation of the teacher and learner.

The thesis not only includes research into quality in distance higher education, but also considers DHE as a service provision. It is difficult to define 'quality' and frequently it is referred to as an intuitive notion ('I'll know it when I see it'). Pirsig (1974) considers it as a notion that is infrequently open to conscious inspection:

Quality is a characteristic of thought and statement that is recognized by a non-thinking process. Because definitions are a product of rigid, formal thinking, quality cannot be defined. (p200)

Defining quality is therefore tacit and to some extent implicit in what we say and do. This notion then leads to the assumption that decisions are being made on the selection of one product or service over another based on tacit knowledge (for explanations of tacit knowledge see Argyris, 1999; Sternberg, 1999). At any one time we all use our evaluation skills to make decisions and choices, whether it is to purchase a tin of baked beans or to choose which film to see one evening. The choice of baked beans may be based on habit,

price, flavour or marketing strategy. It can say something about our decision in that we are choosing intrinsic ‘quality’ over price or we just want value for money and no fancy packaging. The retail outlet offers a choice of these products and we weigh up the pros and cons before making a decision. The selection of which film to watch is based on previous experience of particular film genres, timing of the show and earlier recommendations or criticisms. The decision is based on criteria that are more akin to service industry qualities, such as convenience and prior experience. However, ‘choices’ increase in complexity depending on the values important to the purchaser. These same decision-making mechanisms could be used when discussing the quality of education and when comparing higher education institutions (HEIs). It appears that we are measuring quality and evaluating products and services based on certain criteria that are usually founded on personal experience, and where definitions of quality are value judgements (Middlehurst, 1992, Harvey et al., 1992a).

In the previous examples, personal experience and prior evaluations of a product or service appear to be linked to assumptions of ‘value for money’ or ‘fitness for purpose’. Quality assurance definitions frequently use these types of criteria as a basis on which to improve the quality of provision. Many of the definitions of quality have been used to improve the quality of the production of goods, so that quality can be measured or assessed in some way (Juran, 1962, Deming, 1986), giving rise to quality assurance, quality control, quality audit etc.

In the quality assurance literature, conceptions of quality are usually related to the notions previously mentioned, i.e. ‘value for money’, but what is less well understood are service industry stakeholders’ conceptions of quality, particularly those of educational stakeholders. Research studies of quality have tended to concentrate on the study of

commercial environments, and where these have been applied to higher education the tendency is towards traditional face-to-face modes of delivery.

My personal motivation to complete the research for this thesis was based on an intrinsic interest in organizational systems and interactions. I was interested in how these systems impacted on distance education and whether distance education was now no longer different from traditional higher education and where higher education was under pressure to widen access and needed to provide resources for remote students.

At the outset of the research, I identified three major threads that impacted on DHE. These were:

- social – for the benefit and improvement of society with an increased level of education, widened access to higher education and to enable individuals to achieve their full educational potential.
- business/corporate – for the improvement of the labour force and the development of a flexible, motivated workforce. To improve the economy, and raise the standards of the work force population.
- technological – the push by the changes in the development of new technologies, which in turn has impacted on the delivery of higher education.

These threads are highlighted and discussed throughout the thesis, as is the development of models of assuring the quality of products and services that could be analogous to models and approaches drawn from other disciplines.

During the period of the research study, which started in 1997, there were a number of changes to procedures for quality assurance in higher education, the most notable of which

was the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997). This had a major impact on HE quality assurance and its impact is discussed in the thesis.

The research study used a phenomenological phenomenographic approach and comprised 33 in-depth interviews. A pilot study was conducted prior to the main study and included 8 interviews during June and July 2000. The main study of 33 interviews took place over 18 months between June 2001 and December 2002, and so the analysis must be set in the context of the period during and after the interviews. The passage of time and the developing context for DHE have therefore had some impact on the study, and I have attempted to consider their impact within the thesis.

In the thesis the term ‘perception’ is used to denote not only an internal feeling or sensory excitation, but also that it has reference to an external cause. The term ‘conception’ is used when someone’s opinion, belief or personal view is built and formed from a number of previous experiences.

1.2 Quality

The research is based on stakeholders’ conceptions of DHE quality, so stakeholder analysis was conducted to identify those who have a ‘stake’ in the quality of the education. The stakeholder groups include government and employers; students who are the recipients of the education; academic staff who see their working practices as affected; and alumni and student associations who want to see high levels of teaching quality and post-graduation employment. All of these stakeholders have an interest in a high-quality education system. However, in reality many of these groups are unable to adequately influence the development of quality assurance procedures, because they have not been included during the developmental phase of HE or DE quality assurance.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are large financial businesses in terms of the scale of their activities. This makes financial matters extremely important in conducting their core business, i.e. education. There has always been a need to establish good practice in keeping control on the large sums of money that go in and out of an educational establishment.

Where the source of most of the finance for the large educational institutions comes from the government, there is even more pressure to develop systematic processes to take account of the financial movement. Systems are therefore established early on to make sure that what is being purchased and spent is good value for money. Systems for processing and monitoring money transfer, i.e. audit, are aspects that educational institutions have to establish, and when it can be seen that these work satisfactorily in one area of the institution, then it is easier to look at other ways of systematically measuring the reliability of processes.

The aim of this research was to 'fill a gap'. From the literature I have found that substantial quantities of research in the UK focused on the quality assurance and audit of higher education. What was missing was the same level of discussion and critique of distance education provision in the UK, at a time when there was a growth in using distance education delivery systems within higher education.

Third party assurance of the quality of distance education (DE) has more recently come under scrutiny because of the globalisation of education. Now that more UK institutions can offer higher education to other countries and those countries can also offer UK students educational courses, there is then a greater need to have robust quality assurance systems or guarantees of acceptable levels of provision (Jelfs, 1999).

At the same time distance education has been seen as a way to open up opportunities for those who are undervalued and excluded in 'normal' circumstances. One of the major providers in distance education, the Open University, was founded on the basis of 'openness' to people, where individuals get a 'chance' to gain a higher education without the constraining conditions of having to physically attend a university's premises. Today the Open University is not based on 'second chance' and distance education is no longer the remit of a small number of providers. It is now an accepted aspect of many UK universities. The term 'distance education' is used in the thesis to mean the type of teaching and learning that is conducted between the teacher and the learner via printed text, electronic methods such as CDs and DVDs and other information and communication technologies, and where the teaching and learning is frequently asynchronous, rather than synchronous.

1.3 The research aims

The underlying aim in examining DHE quality is simple, and is common to all studies of quality – to improve provision and provide information on the quality of the goods or services.

The benefits of the research study are to provide a greater understanding of the theoretical concepts of quality and how these are applied to distance higher education. Another issue tackled by the thesis is the extent to which stakeholders' conceptions of quality differ from each other. This would assist in understanding when and why some measures do not improve the quality of the educational provision.

From the literature review, a number of interrelated issues emerged for investigation: first, the assumption that stakeholders have differing perspectives on different 'things' that have

the same label (Harvey and Green, 1993b p29); second the possibility that different stakeholders place different emphasis and importance on certain aspects of quality in distance higher education than on others.

These issues were investigated through a phenomenological approach to phenomenography and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders. The decision to use phenomenological phenomenography in the research was made because it had the potential to look at the qualitatively different ways in which stakeholders perceive and conceive quality in DHE. The philosophy underpinning phenomenology was applicable to research into stakeholders' conceptions of teaching quality and phenomenography provided a research tradition appropriate to teaching. However, there had been little previous research using phenomenological phenomenography and therefore little written about the methodological underpinnings of such an approach. Therefore, a further aim of this research was to develop an appropriate methodology and to evaluate its potential as a research method.

1.4 Overview of thesis

The purpose of Chapter 2 is to give some insight into the nature and status attributed to notions of quality and it discusses the formalised methods devised to ensure the quality of products and processes, which were primarily developed in the twentieth century. These methods originated in a simple inspection-based system which identified 'bad' workmanship and where fault repair was needed. Later this developed into a more holistic approach to quality assurance and quality enhancement. Chapter 2 explores the relevance of this evolution to HE.

Consumers, providers and other stakeholders appear to have notions about quality and what quality is to them and previous research had suggested that all stakeholders' conceptions of quality should be taken seriously and investigated to establish notions of what quality is to those sectors. It was suggested that this would assist in the manufacture of goods and the provision of services, hence the main research question: **What are the conceptions of quality held by stakeholders' in distance higher education?**

In **Chapter 3**, the discussion of quality assurance moves to DHE quality. To ensure that all the education for which it provided funding was of a satisfactory quality or better, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) encouraged improvements in the quality of the education offered (HEQC, 1996). A small selected number of the distance education community contributed to development of distance education guidelines, but the major influence was from HEFCE. This led the six core aspects of distance education provision and the guidelines for assuring its quality:

- Curriculum design
- Teaching, learning and assessment
- Progression and achievement
- Student support and guidance
- Learning resources
- Quality assurance and enhancement

The purpose of these guidelines was to provide a framework that institutions could use and adapt to their own culture and traditions in order to measure the quality of provision.

Further development of guidelines, particularly for distance education were produced in 1999 and consisted of six guidelines: system design; programme design; management of

programme delivery; student development and support; student communication and representation; and student assessment (QAA 1999).

Since the 1999 guidelines, distance education providers, such as the Open University have become part of the QAA's higher education audit system and there has appeared to be a tendency to see distance education delivery as 'more mainstream' as it was being adopted by 'traditional' tertiary institutions. If distance education provision is no longer separate from higher education then there is a need for only one set of guidelines. The benefits would be a more systematic and comparable set of findings, which would integrate the perceptions of educational stakeholders into the development of any guidelines. This might reduce the gap between expected and received outcomes of DHE.

The literature on higher and distance education quality assurance, reveals a top-down approach to quality where institutions approach quality assurance as something decided by governmental agencies and where the current approaches are judgemental and not based on improving teaching practice. Therefore research into what stakeholders see as quality and a bottom-up approach has potential advantages of influencing teaching practices.

Chapter 4 provides details of the methods used to investigate DHE stakeholders' conceptions of quality and the rationale behind the decision to use phenomenological phenomenography. A qualitative study of stakeholders' conceptions of distance higher education quality offered the opportunity to explore issues that may have been too complex or subtle to investigate through quantitative means.

Phenomenology studies how people perceive something (a phenomenon) and describe it to share with others perceptions and emotions such as beauty, anger, or sorrow. It could

potentially provide an insight into reasons why stakeholders hold specific views about quality. Stakeholders' conceptions of high quality DHE could be related to their context, behaviour and perceptions of what occurs in DHE.

Chapter 5 provides the details of the data collection method, sample and procedure. The pilot study and main study data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which were recorded for later transcription and analysed using both phenomenographic and phenomenological approaches.

Chapter 6 reports the details of the main study and the analysis. The aim was to establish if there was a relationship between stakeholders' experiences and conceptions of good distance teaching. The analysis seeks to explore the relationship between stakeholders' conceptions and perceived expectations of the teaching.

From the interviews, each group was found to hold different concepts and levels of perceptions about high 'quality' distance higher education. This chapter reports the main research study and analysis and presents the concepts derived from the stakeholders' interviews. Twelve concepts were identified: communication; credibility; pedagogy; convenience; systems; challenge; cost; satisfaction; change; consistency; creative; and experience. Generally, there were consistent differences between the stakeholder groups and their conceptions of teaching quality.

In **Chapter 7**, the findings are discussed together with their potential significance. I was unable to establish a single definition of distance higher education quality, but certain aspects were more important to some stakeholder groups than to others. In this chapter I also discuss how the research changed and evolved over the time period.

To summarise, the purpose of this thesis was to achieve a greater understanding of a range of stakeholders' concepts of quality, whilst at the same time giving those stakeholders who previously had little influence on quality assurance guidelines the opportunity to voice their conceptions. The ability to gain the understanding of stakeholders' conceptions of quality required an approach that was relevant to conceptual understanding and also grounded in education, that of phenomenological phenomenography. The research resulted in the finding that there was a difference in the concepts, and their importance and relevance were different to the stakeholder groups. This in turn has implications for those designing and using systems for ensuring and assuring DHE quality.

Chapter Two - Quality assurance and its relationship to higher education

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the literature related to two broad areas that frame the thesis and the relationship between quality and distance higher education. These areas are: quality assurance theories and methods outside the higher education sector; and quality assurance within higher education. The examination of quality assurance procedures and methods is to illustrate the influence of other sectors on policy and government development of quality assurance for higher education. The aim of this chapter is to examine the following key questions:

1. Reasons for the growth in higher education

- Has the growth in higher education required institutions and governments to look at ensuring the quality of provision?
- Has the growth led to the development of new delivery systems?

2. Quality Assurance and higher education

- What are the government's guidelines for assuring quality?
- What are other stakeholders' definitions of quality?

3. Quality assurance philosophies and theories in other sectors

- How have other sectors, particularly service sectors, attempted to measure quality?
- Are these relevant to higher education quality assurance?

In answer to the first set of questions, this chapter reviews the literature on the social and economic contribution of an educated workforce to the maintenance and development of a sustainable economy in the UK. Section 2.2 covers the increased growth and development

of a diverse education system that in turn fuels a demand for higher education to be more accountable to the government on behalf of taxpayers. Section 2.3 considers quality assurance and higher education (HE) in the UK, but primarily focusing on England and Wales. Section 2.4 focuses on the analysis of influential stakeholders definitions of quality in higher and distance education. Section 2.5 reviews the literature on quality assurance in production systems and service industries in order to make comparisons to HE and to illustrate how these have influenced the design of quality assurance systems in HE. Section 2.6 discusses how current models of quality assurance have influenced the service sector and higher education in particular, and whether there are alternatives to these forms of quality assurance.

2.2 Reasons for the growth in higher education

One of the fundamental policy aims of higher education, after the Second World War, was to achieve equity of entitlement for the whole population to benefit from the best available primary and secondary education. This might be direct benefit for the individual student in gaining an education or indirect benefit to the country's economy through an increase in an educated workforce.

The need to assure the quality of higher education (HE) provision partly came about because of the growth in numbers of both students and providers within the sector.

Increased levels of provision and a diverse student body required governments to become alert to student and employer needs. At the same time, there was the fear that widening

participation could lead to the reduction in the quality of the education, through the

admission of students with lower educational qualifications and the decline in the available resources. In fact, there is a tension between an elite and a mass system of higher education (Yorke, 2000).

2.2.1 Increase in access to higher education

This section reviews the concerns that successive governments have expressed about the fluctuating higher education student numbers and the perceived need by the governments of the day for an educated workforce due to economic reasons. The starting point for this review is 1963 and this was chosen because one of the major impacts on higher education in the last half of the twentieth century was the Committee Report on Higher Education (1963) frequently referred to as the ‘Robbins Report’ referring to the name of the committee’s leader, Lord Robbins.

The major contributions of the Robbins’ Committee’s report was the way in which it outlined the need for higher education to widen its student recruitment and its acknowledgement that home background played a vital part in student recruitment. The report noted that higher education (HE) was seen as elitist by the general public and perceived as available only for those that could afford to attend. The committee aimed to remedy this by pointing out that HE should be available to all individuals with the ability and motivation to achieve a degree.

Throughout our Report we have assumed as an axiom that courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and wish to do so. (p8 para. 31) [this is frequently referred to as the Robbins Principle.]

The committee recognised that the value of a degree depended on the status of the awarding university and this was one of the first occasions when the perceived quality of an institution was acknowledged as influencing public and academics’ perceptions of the

quality of a degree. The committee felt that it should be dependent not on the university's status, but on the individual's ability.

We think that in any properly co-ordinated system of higher education the academic grading of individuals should depend upon their academic accomplishment rather than upon the status of the institution in which they studied. We are well aware that there are limits to the realisation of this principle, and that the status accorded by the world to a degree from an institution of long standing and established reputation may well be higher than the status of degree earned in an examination of comparable severity in an institution of more recent foundation. (pp 8 para. 34)

The committee recognised that the ideal situation would be where the individual's ability was the cornerstone on which the degree is viewed and not the status of the institution.

The report, together with the support of educational sociologists found that the economic circumstances of the home as a major influence on the proportion of children reaching full-time higher education. The result was to advocate widening participation and to encourage students from non-traditional backgrounds to take up the opportunity of higher education. At the same time, the report noted the limitations of universities in being able to keep up with the demand and identified a period of crisis in higher education when there would be insufficient places for the number of potential students. This would come about because of the large number of children born just after the Second World War (i.e. between 1945 and 1947), who would be eligible for a place in higher education between 1965 and 1968. The committee foresaw that if all those eligible were to enrol, then HE as it stood at that time would be unable to cope. The committee therefore suggested two courses of action to alleviate the anticipated over-subscription to universities:

1. the establishment of evening courses for first degrees.
2. the establishment by some universities of correspondence courses and intensive teaching to external students during the summer vacation period.

The Robbins report was conducted at a time of economic and cultural change. At that time young people were becoming more influenced by television, films and music, including the recognition that there was a world of opportunities available to them including HE. By widening access it was anticipated that more young people would be attracted to higher education. The potential of other forms of media to enhance correspondence courses was also recognised in the report:

We think it likely that television, as a technique of educational communication, may be found to have considerable potential value as an ancillary both for part-time and correspondence study. ('Robbins Report' 1963 p262 para. 821)

It was 1966 before a White Paper coined the phrase 'The University of the Air' (Cmnd 2922 p.5, 1966) and set out a plan for an 'open' university, which would use the then available media of broadcast (electronic) resources of television and radio, as well as traditional written correspondence teaching.

The expected period of growth of HE did occur in the early 1960s, but was followed in the 1980s by a downturn in student recruitment. HE had almost tripled in size since 1960 and stood at 520,000 full-time and sandwich students and 230,000 part-time students in 1978. Successive governments had adhered to recommendations of the Robbins' Committee's report that higher education should be available for all those who were qualified by ability and attainment to pursue a higher education degree, and this led to the anticipated growth

Successive governments had adhered to recommendations of the Robbins' Committee's report that higher education should be available for all those who were qualified by ability and attainment to pursue a higher education degree, and this led to the anticipated growth in student numbers. However, a Green paper written by the Department of Education and Science and the Scottish Education Department (Higher Education into the 1990s, DES, 1978) indicated the decline in birth rate in the 1970s. The focus of this Green paper was on the anticipated demographic changes in the period 1981-1994. The Department of Education and Science and the Scottish Education Department's report identified a fall in birth rate since 1964, which would lead to higher education institutions feeling the effects in the early 1980s. This caused the Department of Education, and the Labour government concern.

Although it was appreciated by the Department of Education in 1978 that part-time courses had higher wastage rates due to the demands on the students, it was the government's opinion that part-time studying was an achievable option that would provide an economically viable workforce and increase the population's education standards. In comparison with full-time HE, part-time education can also be perceived as beneficial to employers as workers complete their education outside normal working hours and at reduced, or no cost, to the employer.

The suggestion by the Department of Education was to encourage a growth in student numbers when the expected fall would occur by once again encouraging those students from non-traditional backgrounds such as people from a manual-working background. The Department at that time aimed to devote more educational resources to those already in employment and to encourage mature students through increased grant allowances (financial awards).

By the time of the predicted demographic changes of the 1980s, a Conservative government had replaced the Labour government of 1976-79. It was governmental papers such as the Green Paper, (The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s, Cmnd 9524 1985), which highlighted the Conservative government's concerns about the need for an educated workforce. The paper outlined the fact that the economic performance since 1945 (the end of World War II) had been disappointing compared to the achievements of other countries (they do not indicate who they are comparing the UK with). However, to remedy this problem the government believed that it was vital for higher education to contribute more effectively to improve the performance of the economy. At the time of the Green Paper (1985) full-time student fees were met by the student awards system at an administrative cost, which the Secretary of State's report identified as a cost that could be saved if the fees were not paid by the awards system. The university would then have to recoup the lost income from the student. This would lead to greater financial engagement on the part of students, which in turn the Education Department anticipated would cause the students to take greater care over their choice of study.

The suggestion was to reform the system of student support from public funds (grant allowances) and to reduce financial support. It was argued that this would increase the incentive for students to consider more carefully their choice of degree subjects to ensure the degree they chose led to good employment prospects. In particular, it was hoped to attract students to areas where there were perceived skills shortages, such as in science and technology that needed to be filled. To redress these shortages the government argued for increased links between HE with industry and commerce. This included the development of science parks and business clubs and the appointment of business people to the

governing bodies of some universities. There was also a perceived need for universities to adapt quickly to change and this was recognised in the Jarratt Report (1985), which recommended the development of universities' management structures and practices to respond to change along private sector corporation lines (Brown, 2004). The Green Paper (1985, Cmnd 9524) stated that there was a need for a change in attitude to the world outside of higher education and, in particular, that universities needed to be aware of, and act to discourage, 'anti-business snobbery'.

'Academic standards' in universities had traditionally been viewed in terms of selecting the most able candidates, and examining them with suitable rigour. External examiners were the only form of comparability between institutions and exam success was the only measurable feature. In contrast, the Polytechnics, through the CNAA (Council for National Academic Awards), were required to plan their courses in detail before they could be offered (i.e. inputs were assessed, rather than just outputs). This led to the early debates about 'value added' as an appropriate measure for comparing HE institutions. The CNAA also saw the academic development of the sector and in effect legitimised a series of developments which transformed higher education: new subjects (e.g. business studies); new means of delivering programmes (such as modularisation); and new ways of recognising learning (such as credit accumulation and transfer) (Brown 2004 p36).

To gain greater acceptability by commercial investors, higher education had to be more explicit in its outcomes, methods and assurance of the quality of the student output. The notion was that removal of the differences between universities and polytechnics would also remove some of the 'anti-business snobbery' because all would be competing for financial input from industry and on an equal footing. Increased input and the connection with commercial investors would endorse their position as valid stakeholders in higher

education. They would also have increased interest in measuring the outcomes of their investment and assuring the quality of that investment.

In 1985, the Education Department also saw a need for changes in the mode and length of degree delivery and they suggested a small number of universities and polytechnics (the Green Paper was written before 1992 and the removal of the binary divide) should test how acceptable a two year degree would be to students. There was also the potential for increasing the levels of engagement with distance education by all institutions:

Distance Learning may be not only the best, but the only means of disseminating quickly and on a substantial scale, expertise in new and rapidly developing disciplines. (Green paper 1985, Cmnd 9524 p27 para. 6.10)

This paper also suggested the quality assurance of all higher education provision through external scrutiny and the measurement of student success rates at obtaining employment and their relative salaries. Quality of education relied not only on external measurable student completion rates and first destinations, but it also required internal measurements of quality:

The primary responsibility for preserving and enhancing quality however lies within each institution. Success in this respect depends first and foremost on the quality, competence and attitudes of the academic staff. (p28 para 6.11)

Academic staff would no longer be eligible for tenure (permanent posts) and the removal of tenured posts would allow universities the opportunity to make redundancies, as and

when there was need to do so. It was implied this could potentially increase the quality of academic provision to students, as poor academic staff could be removed from their posts. This was the first push by the government to ensure HE had a more rigorous and measured quality assured provision. Academics were therefore being coerced into an audit culture of accountability and measurement of outputs. However, some of those involved in assuring higher education quality at the time saw the development of an audit culture in the 1980s as an actual threat to quality as it was felt to constrain professional practice (Brown 2004).

At that time (1980s), there was to be increased involvement by industry and commerce and an increased governmental need to see what higher education was offering to the economy and which institutions were offering the best students for their economic needs. This was not an isolated development, as from the mid-1980s there had been the development of managerialism in the public sector (Pollitt, 1990, Morgan and Murgatroyd, 1994, Rowley, 1998). 'New managerialism' is an attempt to understand how managerial techniques usually associated with medium and large 'for profit' businesses are imposed onto public sector and voluntary organisations (Deem, 1998). Managerialism which imposed a culture of audit and accountability to governments and employers as major investors in higher education.

In 1987, which was a time of anticipated decline in student numbers, the Conservative government considered that student demand was an insufficient basis for the planning of higher education (Meeting the Challenge, 1987). The government saw a major determinant as the demand for highly qualified workforce, which the government viewed as reflecting on their own success, 'stimulated in part by the success of the Government's own economic social policies' (ibid). At the same time the Government recognised the demand by 'non-traditional' students, those for example classified as mature and part-time and saw distance learning as a way of allowing a larger market to be reached.

In 1987, the government recognised the need to ensure the quality of the educational provision within Higher Education and suggested a possible outline for quality standards and how they can be judged:

1. Academic standards through course design and content, and fitness for purpose.
A need to establish what is required from students to complete the course and what the needs are of employers and it was anticipated that this would lead to the development of performance indicators.
2. Quality of the teaching, where this would lead to a systematic arrangement for staff training and development, also, staff appraisal, employment patterns and feedback from students.
3. Achievement of students including subsequent employment. This would look at the academic standards and the quality of higher education teaching. It was anticipated that this would be judged by reference to students' achievements.
The figures of performance would be published so that a Higher Education Institution's record could be evaluated by the funding bodies, government, students and employers.
4. Quality of Research. This point aims to increase the investment of industry into research and development, including collaboration between industry and higher education.

Higher Education. Meeting the Challenge (White paper CM114, April 1987)

There was a need for good managerial experience at the Vice Chancellor level and it was recommended that financial responsibility should be devolved to the university level CNA A (1987). This would give heads of higher education institutions (HEIs) more in common with heads of commercial and industrial companies. The new dynamic heads of HEIs needed a clear management information system with 'indicators of performance' to

enable management decisions and a link between financial resources and performance indicators. The indicators would primarily be generated by institutions, although the data would assist inter-institutional comparisons. Individual HEIs would publish their own performance, so that the funding and governing bodies could evaluate them. Performance indicators measuring results against expected targets that could be used as comparisons in a competitive market, something that HE had not been accustomed to doing. Prior to this students had attended particular universities based on ability, now there was an element of choice given to students and stakeholders to see how well the university provided the education experience they wanted and the employability rates. It had the potential to lead to an over-emphasis on aspects that can be easily quantified at the expense of qualitative changes.

This raises a number of issues, such as whether education is copying business practices because it sees these practices as beneficial to running the organisation, or because it is being coerced into this situation through resource allocation concerns. If resources from the government are not being increased except through widening participation, then universities need to look at marketing their courses. The term 'widening participation' refers to the increase in the numbers of 'non-standard' entrant students plus increased participation by those with 'standard' entry qualifications. Widening access to HE through the use of distance education is one of the ways to increase the market base and thereby resource allocation (a market consists of potential buyers and sellers that trade in goods or services (Bannock, 1998)).

As heads of HEIs needed performance indicators and there was a perceived need for comparability of institutions, the areas that can easily be measured and quantified are the most attractive. For example, graduate employment rates, where employment rates are used as a performance indicator rather than looking at enhancing employability (Knight &

Yorke 2003). Where employability is de-contextualised from the reality of the social and cultural impacts of employment, and where gender, race and politics all come into play (Morley, 2001).

During the 1990s, there were a number of impacts on assuring the quality of higher education in the UK, as well as the sector in general. One of the first major changes was the development of 'new' universities in 1992. These were polytechnics or higher education institutions that were given degree award bearing status. This was seen as the 'real key' to achieving HE expansion and greater competition for funds and students by 'breaking down the increasingly artificial and unhelpful barriers between the universities, and the polytechnics and colleges' (DES 1991).

The Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) was abolished in 1993 (Statutory Instrument No. 924) and in 1994 the arrangements for the quality assurance of higher education was conducted by two bodies, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) that reviewed quality assessment – the quality of teaching and learning in institutions, and the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) whose function was to conduct a quality audit on the methods used by institutions to assure the quality and standards. There were different views about quality assurance where it was determined as inherent in the students' final qualifications and the academic staff research for the older institutions, rather than the need to provide formal structures to ensure the quality of the institution and the qualifications for the newer universities (Brown 2004). Initially the Quality Assurance Division of the HEFCE carried out the assessments of the quality of education in the funded institutions, but in April 1997 this responsibility was passed to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

Another important report on the expansion and aims of higher education is that of the 'Dearing Report' produced by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997). This report highlighted the growing interdependence between students, institutions, the economy, employers and the state. The report also voiced concern about the arrangements for quality assurance as it was felt to be insufficient to ensure comparability of standards in an enlarged higher education sector. It was thought that to preserve staff-student contact within a reasonable cost structure there would be a need to increase resource-based learning to cover the majority of student learning time. For this to be acceptable the resource materials had to be well designed (whether print, audio visual or software) and capable of supporting students working independently. The committee said that traditional textbook style would not suffice. Since rapid expansion has occurred, the 'depersonalisation' of the university experience has been a recurrent theme in much of the criticism aimed at today's universities (Deer, 2002). The criticism focuses on the basis that there is reduced access to a personal tutor on a one-to-one basis, and greatly increased student numbers in seminars and lectures. The quality of the experience for students would therefore be reduced if compared to the Oxbridge model of one-to-one tutorials. Thus indicating a need to ensure the quality of the 'poorer' provision in achieving the necessary quality of the qualifications.

Moves to more flexible and resource-based learning were features highlighted in the recent White paper on 'The Future of Higher Education' (DfES, 2003a). The suggestion was that to increase the level of an educated workforce a two-year Foundation degree should be developed. These degrees either two years full-time study or part-time over a longer period (but not stated how long) would be available 'via a variety of flexible study methods, for example web or work-based learning as well as at universities or further education colleges to help overcome the practical barriers to learning for people with work or other

commitments' (http://www.dfes.gov.uk/higher_education/policies.shtml accessed 24.09.03). The aim was to increase to 50% the number of people up to the age of 30 with the opportunity to benefit from higher education (in England, but not in Wales and Scotland had already achieved this target).

Reviewing the official reports and papers since 1963, there is an apparent concern about possible poor quality academic provision, an increased need for a highly educated workforce and an increase in access to higher education. Universities were faced with the dual tasks of widening access and widening the curriculum, whilst receiving less direct governmental funding. Governments took the option of increasing student contributions to their university fees and universities increased their resource-based teaching and learning. At the same time, the growth in new technologies allowed for the development of more part-time and off-campus teaching and learning. There was an encouragement to provide feedback on teacher performance as a limited form of student empowerment (Harvey and Green, 1993b) and numerous audit systems were developed within universities.

The next section considers the arrangements for quality assurance in higher education.

2.3 Quality assurance and higher education

One example of researchers attempting to review the historical explanation of quality management for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) was provided by Brennan and Van Kught (1993). They referred to the 1991 Government White Paper as adopting specific meanings for terms of quality:

- quality control – mechanisms for maintaining and enhancing quality of provision.
- quality audit – external scrutiny which provides guarantees that institutions have suitable quality control mechanisms.

- quality assessment – external review and judgements of the quality of teaching and learning institutions, including institutional self-assessment.

At that time, the quality assurance audit was carried out by one agency, the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), that was owned by the universities. It was assessed by another, the Higher Education Funding Council for England and Wales (HEFCE). Since then, the two agencies have combined to form the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). Scotland had its own quality assurance system.

The teaching quality assessment and the quality audit, formerly undertaken by the funding councils, became part of the remit of the QAA (1997) and the six core aspects of the self-assessment set out by the HEFCE/QAA for higher education were:

- Curriculum Design,
- Teaching, Learning & assessment,
- Progression and achievement,
- Student support and guidance,
- Learning resources
- Quality assurance & enhancement.

The argument for the six core aspects was that in a knowledge-based economy, and in a society where lifelong learning is becoming part of society's expectations, then qualifications are a 'vital currency'. The quality reviews that the QAA instigated were carried out to: ensure accountability and value for money; provide public information on quality and standards; and promote enhancement of provision (QAA 2001). It was assumed that if qualifications are indeed a 'vital currency', then prospective students needed information about the quality of the courses they may wish to follow and employers needed to know about the standards achieved by graduates who they may

recruit. Both students and employers needed impartial and readily available information on which to base their choices about where to study or where to recruit. There was also a feeling that employers needed to be further involved with universities, particularly when universities were being measured on graduate employability rates (Leon, 2002). It appears from all this discussion that there is a multiplicity of stakeholders in higher education, including students, employers and society as a whole, but it is questionable whether all of these groups should have an equal impact on assessing the quality of provision.

It is also important to note that the QAA is dependent, although not directly, on government for its legitimacy, funding and operational resources, therefore government has a primary role in decisions on quality assurance (El-Khawas, 2001). At the time of writing, the QAA also 'networks closely' with higher education where the divisional manager of the Quality and Employability Division of the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) is an invited observer at the QAA. This provides an indication that there are close links with employment, employability and governmental influence on the QAA's development of quality assurance guidelines.

In 2003, the QAA produced a strategic plan with a revised mission statement, which aims to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualification, and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education (QAA, 2003). This involves a 'lighter' touch to quality assurance by the Agency in which institutional audits will be conducted in a six-year cycle. There will also be a sharper focus on liaison with stakeholders, with the aim of 'meeting public information needs, so that stakeholders – and above all students – can obtain information which is up-to-date, consistent and reliable about the quality and standards of teaching and learning at different HEIs (HEFCE, 2003a p5).

To provide heads of universities with the necessary managerial skills there has been the development of a Top Management Programme by Universities UK and a mentoring scheme in which approximately 40 heads of universities and colleges have the opportunity of being mentored by, or job shadowing leading managers from other parts of the economy (Newby, 2003). All this points to a development of managerial styles and influences on higher education institutions, particularly at the senior levels. This section portrayed the developing needs that governments maintained were necessary to guarantee a highly qualified output from HE. There had to be quality assurance of products and processes and little attention was being paid to the understanding of 'value added' to the students. Students were expected to want more information on which to base their choice of higher education institution. In the next section, consideration is given to the impact that quality assurance has had on higher education as a whole.

2.4 Impact of quality assurance on higher education

Two of the main writers in the area of quality assurance and higher education are Lee Harvey and Diana Green, who wrote extensively about the theory and practical aspects of assuring quality from the early 1990s (Harvey et al., 1992a; Harvey et al., 1992b; Harvey et al., 1992c; Harvey and Green, 1993b; Harvey et al., 1993a; Harvey, 1995; Harvey et al., 1997; Harvey, 1999; Harvey, 2001). Harvey et al. (1992a) focused their empirical research into higher education quality on eight stakeholder groups: students; employers; government bodies; funding councils; teaching staff; managerial and support staff; accrediting and validating bodies (BTEC, CNAAB); and assessment bodies (HMI). They used a variety of data collection methods, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. From this study, they identified key requirements for each stakeholder group, for instance that employers wanted graduates with transferable skills, whereas staff and students wanted better physical resources (library, etc) and adequate human resources to support teaching and learning. The quality assurers wanted sufficient graduates to meet the

need for a highly educated work force and maintenance of existing standards, and the government wanted comparability of standards between courses and institutions and again the need for a highly educated work force.

Harvey et al. (1992a) concluded that the regular re-evaluation of quality criteria needed to take place as developments in higher education happen in a very short period of time.

These developments would include such areas as course development, changes in expected outcomes and changes in student numbers etc.. This would mean that the requirements for 'quality' higher education also change for each of the stakeholders and that a methodology for assessing quality that focused heavily on the outcomes of education might fail to capture the process of delivery that is important for staff and students.

In a general sense, and not referring only to higher education quality, Harvey and Green (1993b) referred to quality as user-defined, where quality is conceived as being exceptional and its inaccessibility makes an item desirable, such as an Oxbridge education. They also established five definitions of quality:

1. quality as exceptional – that it is something special
2. quality as perfection or consistency – focuses on process and getting things right first time (zero defects)
3. quality as fitness for purpose – quality is judged on something doing the job it was supposed to do.
4. quality as value for money – focuses on accountability
5. quality as transformation – that there will be a 'qualitative change'.

These are similar to the various models/concepts identified in the commercial literature on 'quality' (section 2.5), which sees quality as a threshold; an ideal; a relative concept; value-

laden judgement; cost-cutting goal; added value; and as a means of acquiring and sustaining a competitive advantage. However, many of the studies of quality in both the service sector and the commercial sectors forget that measurements of quality are inferential, in that we infer a value judgement which is usually based on numerical representations and not on personal comments. Whereas, when talking to others we are able to articulate our value judgments so that they can gain an understanding of our notions of quality.

As was seen earlier in the section, quality in higher education has a variety of stakeholders such as government, students, employers and staff and each stakeholder has a different perspective. Harvey and Green (1993b) referred to stakeholders as not having different perspectives on the same thing, but 'different perspectives on different things with the same label' p29. The empirical data collected for this thesis builds on this tenet to some extent by researching the different perspectives that stakeholders have towards distance higher education, and specifically DHE teaching. It was felt that the stakeholder approach was suitable as it had been used by other researchers, such as Harvey and Green in their respected work on quality in higher education. As pointed out, Harvey et al. (1992a) considered eight stakeholder groups: students; employers; government bodies; funding councils; teaching staff; managerial and support staff; accrediting and validating bodies; and assessment bodies (HMI). In the thesis government bodies, accrediting and validating bodies and assessment bodies were incorporated into two over-arching groups, named: quality assurance policy developers and guideline influencers. The reason for this was due to the subsequent development, of the QAA, in which there is no longer a separation of funding and quality assurance.

The increased levels of managerialism, and the increased need for stakeholders to understand the quality of the education being provided, led some institutions to look at quality assurance systems that had been developed for commerce and industry.

Formalising systems in higher education, in what was once seen as a highly unformalised environment and where institutions were expected to have divisions of labour between academics and administrators, could be expected to encounter problems.

This section has reviewed the increased demand of quality assurance of higher education; however, there has been little discussion on the development of particular approaches and the perceived benefits each approach can offer. In the next section, the systems to ensure quality in other sectors are discussed in relation to quality assurance systems in higher education.

2.5 Quality assurance philosophies and theories in other sectors

Discussions around the notion of ‘quality’ could bring about long and arduous philosophical debate, similar to those conducted on what is ‘beauty’ or ‘happiness’ or ‘love’. Usually this leads many people to explain their thoughts on the topic as a feeling that ‘I can’t define it, but I know what it is when I see it’. They use this as a predictive truth that quality is ‘out there’ and when it occurs, ‘I’ll be able to know it’.

Quality... you know what it is, yet you don’t know what it is. But that’s self-contradictory. But some things *are* better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes *poof!* (Pirsig, 1974 p178)

For Kekäle (2002), 'quality' is a slippery concept, where there is no single, agreed or universally accepted definition of the term. However, many theorists and practitioners have attempted to define 'quality' and instigated ways to measure quality, for example, as: 'fitness for purpose'; 'value for money'; 'delighting the customer'. At its simplest level quality-assurance philosophy is based on ensuring quality through specific processes and theories, and these theories change depending on the philosophy being applied.

Philosophies of quality include total quality management (TQM) and quality circles, where the whole company is involved in reflection on ensuring the quality of the product or service to the customer, whereas theories of how to ascertain quality include quality control, quality assurance, performance indicators (PIs), service quality and gap analysis (ServQual) and Business Process Re-engineering (BPR).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the large manufacturing industries were developing new methods for ensuring that the goods they produced were of satisfactory quality to the customer. For many industrialists quality became synonymous with increased market share, brand recognition and cost reduction, and all of these were achievable through the holy grail of correct procedures, company ethos and methodological control. The attainment of a quality product, which would influence repeat purchasing and keep down costs, was an attractive proposition which fostered a growth in methods and philosophies from which the manufacturer could choose.

At this point it might be useful to clarify the differences between quality control and quality assurance. Quality control refers to the process used to meet standards: 'the process through which we measure actual quality performance, compare it with standard, and act on the difference' Juran and Gryna (1980 p. 3). In Britain quality control is defined as the 'operational techniques and activities that are used to fulfil requirements for quality'

(BS4778, Part 1, 1987 p6), and quality assurance is ‘all those planned and systematic actions necessary to provide adequate confidence that a product or service will satisfy given requirements for quality’ (p5). This means that quality control uses data and operational techniques to measure the success, or otherwise, in obtaining a quality product, whereas quality assurance is more proactive and develops systems to assure the quality of a product prior to its production.

To assist in understanding quality assurance and control literature, this section is broken down into three major types: satisfaction; attitudes; and service quality. The satisfaction literature looks at how to satisfy the customers’ needs and please the customer. The attitude literature is more about changing organizational attitudes and views, and the service literature focuses on services rather than products. The following sections review the quality assurance literature under these three headings.

2.5.1 Satisfaction literature

Satisfaction and pleasing the customer are paramount for some theories of quality enhancement systems. However, there is no clear consensus on a definition of satisfaction. Most definitions involve ‘an evaluative, affective or emotional response’ (Oliver and Swan, 1989), and satisfaction literature focuses on the theory of quality as related to consumer culture (Featherstone, 1991). Consumer culture is thought to have resulted from the growing leisure and consumption activities in contemporary Western societies and is based on the expansion of capitalist production. It is assumed that people use goods to create social bonds and distinctions with the emotional pleasures of fulfilling dreams and desires. These satisfy people’s needs and demands and, to do so, must be of high quality to the customer.

The use of quality assurance methodologies, so that the customer becomes the focus of attention and satisfying their needs is paramount, requires organizational change.

Feigenbaum (1983) suggested that quality became a customer's determination of what quality is, and not an engineer's determination or a general management determination. For Feigenbaum quality is based on the customer's actual experience with the product or service measured against his or her requirements, and for most buyers higher-priced products have almost always meant higher-quality products. He argued that buyers continued to purchase with strong attention to price and, to bring the customers back, producers should place increasingly high emphasis on the customer's perception of quality. To achieve this he suggested there was a need for Total Quality Control (TQC), where total quality should apply to all those who are affected by what an organization does, and includes all of its stakeholders (Ackoff, 1992). Quality control through product testing, performance data collection and final inspection is seen as using these techniques and activities to achieve and maintain the quality of a product, process or service (Oakland, 1989). Quality control involves monitoring an activity, whilst at the same time finding and eliminating as many as possible of the causes, which affect quality, so that the requirements of the customer are continually met. As Spreng (1996) points out, managers should not believe that merely meeting (or exceeding) predictive expectations would satisfy customers: customers want something extra that they themselves define.

An influential writer on quality assurance and quality enhancement during the 1970s and 1980s was Taguchi. He developed the Quality Loss Function from his understanding of engineering and experiments (Taguchi 1986). Quality Loss is taken to mean the loss to the customer, and it forms the basis of the financial measure of the user's dissatisfaction. He referred to customers becoming increasingly dissatisfied as the performance of goods departs further from the target the customer wanted. He placed greater emphasis on the

need to reduce variation by optimising the design of products and processes in such a way that they will not deviate far from their targets when things go wrong. Taguchi's work fed into a system and methodology of achieving quality in engineering environments called Six Sigma, which aims at reducing waste during manufacture and manufacturing operations. His work is not so much about satisfying the customer as ensuring they are not dissatisfied.

Customer satisfaction is also influenced by the perceived value of a product, and purchasers are willing to pay a price premium for the added value of buying some brands over alternatives that might have satisfied their buying needs. They perceive a total entity as the brand, and a successful brand, according to de Chernatony and McDonald (1996), is an identifiable product or service augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant unique added values that closely match their needs. A brand's success results from its being able to sustain these benefits in the face of competition, where competition and maintaining customers rely on the company's identity. The identity is communicated either externally by the media, customers, etc. or internally through the company's employees, shareholders etc. (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). There is the assumption that poor or ineffective communication of brand identity can lead to loss of customers.

Another method, claimed to improve customer satisfaction, is benchmarking.

Benchmarking is a systematic way of looking at the mutual benefits through comparison with others. The objectives of benchmarking are to obtain a clearer understanding of competitors' and customers' requirements (Beckford, 1998), where a greater understanding of customers needs will lead to reduced complaints and higher levels of customer satisfaction. The steps to benchmarking include: identification of which characteristic to benchmark; identifying benchmarking partners; designing the data gathering methodology;

selecting analytical tools and implementing changes. Researchers such as Holloway et al (1998, 1999) looked at the processes as well as the practical factors involved in benchmarking and found non-use of benchmarking in other service sectors was associated with factors such as resource constraints, access, staff resistance and confidentiality. Users also wanted advice on conducting benchmarking and did not know where to obtain the necessary advice to achieve the reported benefits of accepting uncomfortable truths and ways to act on the information (Holloway and Francis, 2002). Benchmarking has created some interest in the education sector, particularly in assessment practice (Jackson, 1998). Although it is acknowledged that benchmarking needs vast amounts of time for co-ordination, it is still considered valuable to the education sector:

Benchmarking is, first and foremost, a learning process structure so as to enable those engaging with the process to compare their services (e.g. academic programmes and support for learning) and products (e.g. educated and trained people) in order to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses as a basis for self-improvement. It is a way of identifying best practice so that, where necessary changes can be made to improve practice.

(Jackson 1998, p4)

Benchmarking does, however, appear to work best in organizations that are predisposed to using formal management systems and procedures (Price et al., 1998), therefore, the suggestion is that organizations without these predispositions should not take up this procedure.

Other writers such as Alstete (1995) promoted the notion of benchmarking in higher education because it focuses on research methodologies (such as surveys and site visits),

which is something that higher education is used to conducting. Alstete viewed other quality improvement techniques as using unfamiliar terminology, such as ‘customers’ instead of students, employers, government etc. Alstete differentiates benchmarking from performance indicators as the latter is based on measuring performance, where benchmarking is more interested in process. Others are more critical of benchmarking and question whether it is only another quality management ‘fashion’ which will eventually fade due to lack of participation (Schofield, 1998).

A number of these methodologies have been criticised because of their inappropriateness to the education system and writers such as Kallen (1996) are critical of the use of rules developed for commerce when used in the education sector: ‘rules that may be suitable in the world of business should not be applied automatically in schools and universities.’ (p11). This criticism attempted to indicate which aspects of assuring quality in education rely on methodologies that are inappropriate in measuring ‘good’ or ‘poor’ quality of provision.

There are researchers who are more pragmatic in their approaches and argue that there are different definitions of quality that exist under differing circumstances (Reeves and Bednar, 1994). The example Reeves and Bednar use is that of the romance novel which may be of high quality, meet and exceed expectations and is excellent, but cannot be compared to the quality of a great work of literature that endures the ages. They say that a product or service which exceeded a customer’s expectations at one time may be ordinary at another, as expectations change.

The satisfaction literature points primarily to customer retention through perceived product value and a willingness to pay a premium price. The overall assumption is that people will

willingly stay with a provider that satisfies their intrinsic needs of owning or buying what is seen as best in the field. This literature does not take account of those people who may be dissatisfied with current provision, but are not motivated to change to other providers (for example, changing banks, credit cards or electricity supplier), where there is little perceived benefit in moving to the new provider, although dissatisfied with current provision.

The satisfaction literature is relevant to HE because of its relationship to a consumer culture and satisfying the consumer. There are however difficulties in defining who is the leading customer or consumer in higher education (Alstete, 1995).

2.5.2 Attitude literature

The attitude literature is based on the notion that changing the attitude of the organisation or the customer will either affect the perceptions of quality or improve the product through a total quality focused organisation. The attitude literature points out that the way to ensure the quality of a product is through the controlling of processes and the production of a product with zero defects. One of the earliest advocates of quality assurance was F.W. Taylor in his seminal work on *Scientific Management* (1911). Taylor was of the opinion that when presented with the opportunity, employees would work at a slow pace and would produce substandard materials. It was the role of management to look for poor workmanship and to ensure that faults were repaired. It was expected that faults would occur and it was not the philosophy to stop faults throughout the production system, but to inspect for faults before items left the production site. The attitude was that quality was related to faultless products at the customer end, but it allowed for faulty manufacturing.

After Taylor and the development of quality assurance through inspection, the next major proponents in this area were Deming and Juran. In the 1950s members of Japanese

industry recognised that the quality of their products were inferior to those of Europe and the USA. The Japanese industrialists invited Deming in 1951 and Juran in 1954 to visit Japan and to look at ways to improve the quality of their products. Deming (1986) and Juran (1962) offered methodologies and philosophies on how to improve the quality of the goods, such as the philosophy of quality planning, quality control and quality improvement (Juran, 1962). There was an explicit expectation that the attitude of the organisation would change to adopt a philosophy of quality improvement.

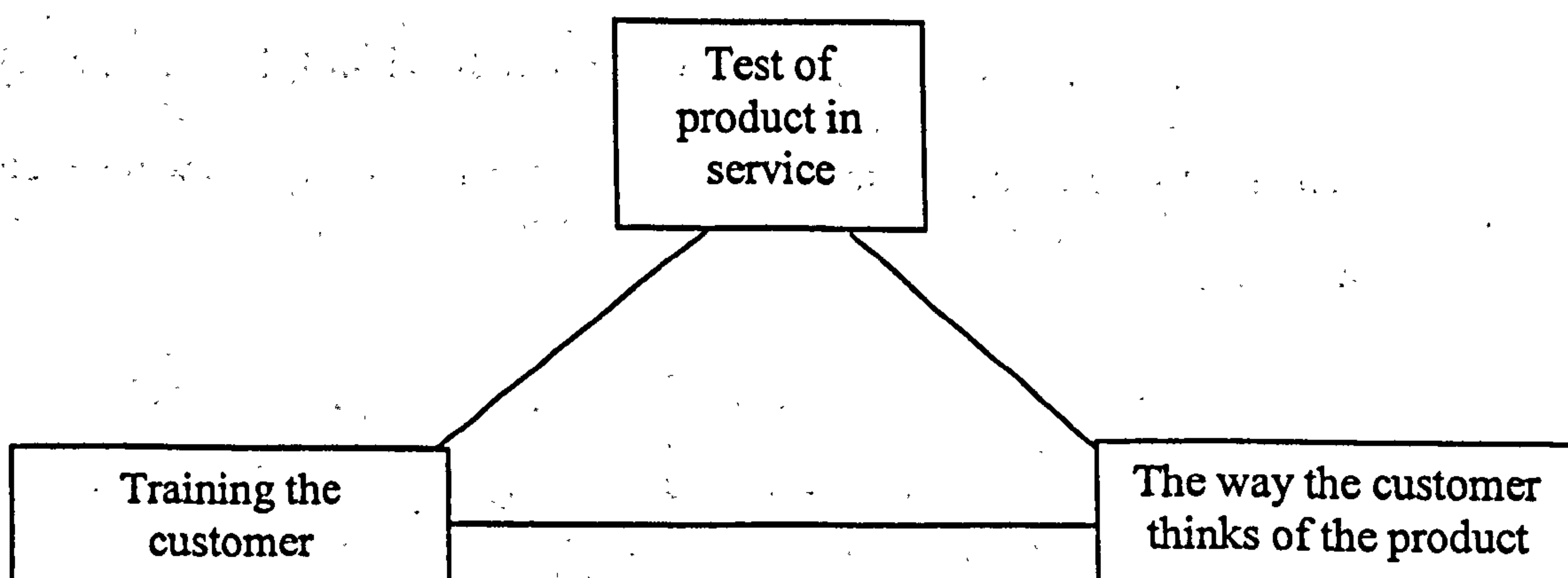
Quality planning identifies the customers' needs and develops the product in response to those needs. Quality control is the measurement of performance, and quality improvement is to provide the remedies to the causes of failure of performance. Juran published the *Quality Control Handbook*, which outlined these ideas in 1951, but he developed the notion of quality control through statistical control after his visits to Japan.

Deming and Juran have many similarities (Logothetis, 1992); however, where they differ is that Juran relies heavily on a systematic approach, whereas Deming offers general approaches. Deming (1986) thought of quality as a 'philosophy' which has the potential to transform industry, through company-wide commitment. This transformation required adherence to the 14 points he identified as a means to transform the industry. He also suggested that these would be a useful set of points for service providers to adopt; however, he acknowledged that service is harder to quantify and that management only measure those things which are easy to measure (Beckford, 1998). The suggestion that it is harder to measure some areas of service provision than others will be returned to later in this thesis.

Deming advocated planning for the future as well as the present, with no toleration of mistakes, defects or flawed products, and, as the re-working of a product costs the company, then it is everyone's job to look at quality. He also provided through his 14 points a means to cure what he saw as the 'Seven Deadly Diseases' of the workplace. These diseases were: lack of constancy of purpose; emphasis on the short term; evaluation of performance; mobility of management; running the company on visible figures; excessive medical costs; and excessive costs of warranties. He instigated the procedure of Statistical Process Control as a way of identifying lack of conformity.

Deming (1986) also saw the customer as the most important part of the production line and suggested that without someone to purchase the product then the producer might as well shut down the whole plant. He offered one description of quality as having three corners, as illustrated in Figure 2.1. The product is tested whilst being used by the customer and the way the customer thinks of the product can be adapted by training the customer in what to expect from the product (such as expecting a washing machine to break-down at least once in five years). Employees of the company must see the customer as the potential source of future revenue, in other words, without the customer there is no job. Although Deming acknowledged the fact that quality assurance would reach the service industries, which included rail and hospitals, he did not mention education.

Figure 2.1 Deming's three corner description



Many Japanese manufacturing companies adopted these early developments of quality assurance and quality control, where the culture is one of worker empowerment and long-term investment in the training and competence of front-line workers (Morgan and Murgatroyd, 1994). It is also acknowledged that stakeholders in quality are not just the external customers and clients or the major investors in the company, but includes fellow workers who depend on the quality of other peoples' work. There is reliance on the detection of minute errors for rectification to avoid defects in the quality of the product and achieve zero defects (Crosby, 1979).

The notion of zero defects relies on management commitment, the training of managers and the establishment of quality councils, so that zero defects becomes an inherent characteristic of the product and not, as Crosby (1979) termed it, 'an added extra'. His philosophy was based on quality as conformance to requirements; by this, he meant customers' requirements - that performance standards must be zero defects, not 'that's near enough'. He attempted to offer a holistic approach through the involvement of staff in groups called quality councils, and he offered producers the opportunity to attain zero defects through staff commitment to the notion of quality as a whole company issue. This is a different approach to staff motivation and involvement to that of Deming, who sees the customer as the focus of quality assurance. Crosby has a much more holistic approach incorporating staff.

In Table 2.1, there is an overview of the main influential people in the development of quality control and quality assurance systems. The table illustrates that the main influencers were based within the US and were primarily from a scientific background that had always relied on quantitative methods. These factors influenced their approaches to ensuring the quality of a product through quality control and quality assurance.

Quantitative measurement of faults and rectification of errors allowed for measurable impact on the quality of the product.

One of the quality assurance methods most commonly known and used is that of Total Quality Management (TQM). This method builds on the attempt to define quality through management and control. TQM developed from the teachings of Deming, Juran, Crosby and Taguchi and was adopted in the USA as a result of Japanese and Korean threats of market penetration. The USA saw the benefits Japanese industry had achieved using the suggestions about how to improve quality and decided to adapt these processes for their own benefit. The term TQM was introduced in 1985 by the US Naval Air Systems Command to describe its Japanese-style management approach to quality improvement.

The key aspects of TQM are:

- continuous improvement
- multi-functional teams
- reduction in variation
- supplier integration
- training and education – not only in its use of techniques, but also as a staff motivator.

TQM advocates empowering the workforce, but according to some writers, it does in fact engender tighter managerial control (Wilkinson et al., 1997). Wilkinson et al. say that what happens is that the 'softer side' of culture change and empowerment are forgotten in the need for 'harder' measurements and control aspects of TQM. They question whether TQM is merely an extension of Scientific Management.

Name & date of seminal writing

	Deming (1986)	Juran (1962)	Crosby (1979)	Taguchi (1982)	Ishikawa (1983)	Feigenbaum (1983)	Oakland (1989)
Background	USA, physics, statistics	naturalised American	USA, manufacturing	Japanese, textile engineer	Japanese	educated in USA	British, chemist
Philosophy or Theory based	Philosophy	Theory	Philosophy	Theory	Theory	Theory	Theory
Approach	Quality Assurance	Quality Control	Quality Control	Quality Control	Quality Control	Quality Control	Quality Assurance
Methodology used	quantitative methods	quantitative methods	quality is measurable	statistical methods	qualitative design	statistical analysis 'where appropriate'	monitoring and statistics
Aims of Methodology	Believed in the use of Statistical Process control (SPC) to identify problems	Quality is a planned activity & management is responsible for quality & goal setting, quality control and improvement	Try to achieve 'zero defects'	Statistics used to identify & eradicate problems	Greater employee involvement to improve product & acceptance by management of employees ability to see problems	Quality built in rather than inspected out.	Quality is meeting customers requirements
Practical Application	Management of the process rather than the outcome	Training is a key feature for Quality improvement. Six Sigma	Quality designed into a product or service at every stage.	Prototyping & pilot work is invaluable. Quality Loss Function taken to mean the loss to the customer – financial measure of user's dissatisfaction	Quality is company-wide incl. after sales service & management and product	If customer expectations on performance & price are met then quality has been achieved	Monitoring for quality problems & eliminating them
Main features	Developed 7 Deadly Diseases of Quality Can have employee resistance. 14 points to achieve quality	Customer driven, both internal & external customers Does not take into account the needs & aspirations of the workforce	Management process Conformance to requirements	Failure to recognise organisations as social systems Customer satisfaction key to quality	Quality control circles are in a single area or workshop Cultural context may influence acceptance of quality circles.	Originated 'Total Quality Control'	Organizational success is based on quality and quality must be managed Customers don't always buy what will delight them, rather what is available (e.g. Microsoft).

Table 2.1 Quality gurus

There has been some uptake of TQM by service providers and, where it has been used in the financial services sector, it has often been implemented in a very mechanistic way that stopped it from being beneficial (Knights and McCabe, 1997). Knights and McCabe say there is a preoccupation with cutting cost that can be detrimental to other aspects of quality such as customer service, because with TQM there is an emphasis on the tangible aspects such as trying to evaluate the price of non-conformance of a product. Knights and McCabe argue that quality gurus such as Crosby ignored the politics, conflicts and power relations in organizations and the ways in which workers interact in a social world and are not merely responding to management directives. Knights and McCabe consider the influence of the human aspects of interaction and particularly in service sectors.

One of the problems associated with TQM is that it is not customer driven, i.e. problems are based on what management priorities are set. Another argument is that with TQM data is collected in different ways, from a variety of sources and methodologies (Goodman et al., 1994). These can be both internal and external sources and there is often no clear explanation of how the data is gathered. There is also no understanding of what makes the customer loyal and Goodman suggested that customer complaints should be used as data for quality assurance. There are also problems when companies try to implement TQM and, according to the Wall Street Journal, 80% of companies adopting TQM fail to achieve the expected outcomes of increased productivity and income, because the companies adopted the jargon, but not the implementation (Hradesky, 1995).

The notional value that TQM has had on industries and its impact on increased productivity and income is questionable (de Cock and Hipkin, 1997). TQM requires objective data, focused only on the problem areas and requires employee involvement. De Cock and Hipkin see Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) as taking TQM's place. BPR involves the reduction of staffing levels, whilst at the same time increasing output. BPR's philosophy is to question the appropriateness of the existing way of organising work in order to achieve an organisation's objectives. One definition is that re-engineering is the fundamental rethinking and radical redesign of business process to achieve dramatic improvements in critical contemporary measures of performance, such as cost, quality, service and speed (Hammer and Champy, 1993). The assumption for undertaking BPR is that the current processes or procedures do not deliver optimal results (Price and Braganza, 1996). In the service sector, to achieve optimal results, reengineering has been used within hospitals to map the patient trail through the hospital (Buchanan, 1997) where the process is then redesigned to improve service and reduce costs.

The attitude literature points out that the way to ensure the quality of a product is through the controlling of processes and production of a product with zero defects. Again relating this to HE is problematic, although some universities have attempted to use TQM as a way of improving process (Doherty, 1995, 1997).

One issue for the thesis is the additional need for higher education to make the cultural change required in order to adopt any of the quality assurance methodologies. An increased focus on auditing and measuring processes to achieve a quality output requires increased levels of managerial and administrative input and some erosion of

trust by academics in managers and the system (Trow, 1994; Gibbs, 1998; Knight and Trowler, 2000). To some extent, this level of management influence and control is alien to many academics who value their academic freedom and feel threatened by the notion of accountability (Åkerlind and Kayrooz, 2003b).

2.5.3 Service quality literature and disconfirmation

Another way to examine 'quality' is to explore the service quality literature. The basis of service quality theory and the disconfirmation paradigm are based on the concepts employed in the physical goods literature (Oliver, 1977; 1980) and adapted to services (Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1985). This puts the perceived service against the expected service and the resulting gap is between expected level of service and customer perceptions of received level (Oliver and Swan, 1989; Robledo, 2001).

There is the suggestion that prior to interaction consumers form expectations about the product or service and, that once formed, these expectations constitute standards against which actual performance is compared (Wirtz and Bateson, 1999; Yoon and Kim, 2000; Ham, 2003). Any discrepancy between the two produces a mental state termed 'disconfirmation' (Oliver and Swan, 1989). The construct of quality as conceptualised in the service literature centres on perceived quality. Perceived quality is defined as the consumer's judgement about an entity's overall excellence or superiority (Zeithaml, 1988) and perceived quality is a form of attitude, related to, but not the same as satisfaction (Rowley, 1997). Rowley sees it as the result of a comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance. In service industries very little is known about the customer prior to their service consumption, and although market research aims to be predictive in this area, much of the customers' perceptions will not be discovered until the service consumption has started.

Perceptions of service quality are exemplified as *should* and *will* expectations to quality (Boulding et al., 1993). For example, all trains *should* arrive on time. The reality is that some providers *will* be better at arriving on time than others. In higher education, the *should* factors are: that the education ‘should provide’ all stakeholders with high quality educational inputs and outcomes. However, some providers *will* be better than others. At the same time people are not always conscious of everything in the service, for instance, students may not be concerned about the tutorial room itself unless it causes them difficulties, or otherwise distracts from the learning experience (Rosen et al., 2003).

Much of the early work on service quality looked at what service quality meant to customers and the development of strategies to meet these needs (Zeithaml et al., 1990; 1996). Their work started a move to how service quality impacts on profit and one of the areas of concern they identified was defection to other suppliers. They saw the lowering of customer defection rates as being more profitable as a way of gaining market share than attempting to capture new customers, which in itself is expensive. Zeithaml et al (1990) identified ten dimensions of service quality that also influenced market share:

1. Reliability – the service is carried out in the way promised.
2. Responsiveness – services are carried out promptly according to the customer’s needs.
3. Competence – staff have the knowledge and skills required to deliver the service.
4. Access – e.g. opening hours, physical location.
5. Courtesy – the staff are polite, friendly etc.

6. Communication – keeping the customers informed.
7. Credibility – the service provider is trustworthy, believable and honest.
8. Security – freedom from danger, risk or doubt.
9. Understanding the customer – the service provider makes an attempt to understand the needs and wants of the customers.
10. Tangibles – physical objects that are needed to carry out the service.

These dimensions have an important value for conceptual understanding of services in specific situations (Lagrosen, 2004), whereas according to Rust et al. (1995) there are diminishing returns to the expenditures on quality and improving quality only helps up to a point, after which it becomes unprofitable due to customisation of services.

There is the view that repeat purchase is influenced by an interrelated relationship between service quality, consumer satisfaction and purchase intentions that results in an attitude which will influence repeat purchasing (Cronin and Taylor, 1992).

Customers who remain with a firm for a period of years because they are pleased with the service are more likely to buy additional services and spread favourable word-of-mouth communication (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Therefore potentially good retention rates and favourable student (customer) opinions would be one way of measuring quality of educational provision.

The service literature provides a bank of information on *how* service perceptions should be measured, but little on *what* should be measured (Brady and Cronin, 2001).

Service provision is problematic in some instances when attempting to measure quality, for example, where service has all the pre-requisites set up, but cannot be completed until someone actively takes part (e.g. hotel occupancy). Service quality to

some extent is influenced by the role of the customer in the service production and the customer becomes co-producer in the service, as for example in education (Schneider and Chung, 1996). At the same time services are inherently intangible and characterised by inseparability, and the interpersonal interactions that take place during service delivery often have the greatest effect on service quality perceptions (Brady and Cronin, 2001). It is the service providers who affect customer perceptions, particularly those who are at the front line, e.g. hotel receptionists, call centre workers, bank cashiers, lecturers, nurses etc.

There is a recurring notion with respect to service quality, which is that gaps between service quality and performance are influential in assessments of quality provision. Pothas et al. (2001) looked at the gaps between customer perceptions and the level of service received, and they decided that service quality is based on the customers' frame of reference, which in that particular case was based on bank customers' satisfaction. Financial institutions as service providers have interested a number of researchers in the area of quality assurance and service. Edvardsson et al. (2000) critically looked at bank and governmental department customers' satisfaction using the Swedish Customer Satisfaction Index. The suggestion was that products are produced prior to selling which allows for an opportunity to build up a brand and marketing strategy, whereas service quality lacks the opportunity to build up the same level of brand appreciation. Once again, there is the notion of brand recognition as influential on perceptions of quality.

Research into service industry customers from survey data of 100 leading companies in 30 industries suggested that customer satisfaction and profitability are linked

through offensive and defensive strategies (Fornell, 1992). Offensive strategies are such things as gaining new customers from market acquisitions or to increase the market share at the expense of competitors. The defensive approach is to make it difficult to move to another supplier: for example, by offering 'frequent flyers', customers are encouraged to stay, not because of superior service, but through economic incentives. Fornell et al. (1996) developed the American Customer Satisfaction Index, based on the Swedish Customer Satisfaction Index, through 250 interviews with customers. The findings were that customisation is more important than reliability, and that the central feature of the old economy was mass production and consumption of commodities. The new economy is one of production and consumption of increasingly differentiated goods and services. Fornell's work was primarily based on qualitative rather than quantitative data, which is what the Swedish Customer Satisfaction Index used.

Services rely on large numbers of people with numerous personal variations and characteristics where personal input to the service varies each day. The interaction with the consumer therefore varies and poor service in any industry could involve customers switching to other suppliers (Khalifa and Liu, 2002-3). The argument that Rowley (1998) puts forward is that specific incidents which satisfy customer's needs will lead to perceptions of good quality service and vice versa. This is also called the Critical Incident Technique in commercial environments. Rowley refers to gaps between expectations and perceived service and identifies four potential gaps: understanding; design; delivery; and communications. Rowley also advocates the notion that attempts to measure quality must include all stakeholders' perspectives, which includes users, influencers, deciders, approvers and buyers.

There has been research into other service sectors such as health care. Klein (1998) suggested that increasing access to National Health Service (NHS) care would mean that a greater proportion of the work would be completed by junior members of staff, which in turn could be of poorer quality and require additional after care support. However, different actors in the health policy area attach differing weights to the dimensions of quality. Klein says that it cannot be taken for granted that public and professional perceptions and definitions will point in the same direction. He argued that the evidence on which to base policy decisions is lacking and that, at that time, little was known about what the effect of performance tables would be in the health service sector. Performance tables are linked to Performance Indicators (PIs), where a value is placed on an outcome, such as operation completion rates in health care, or the retention of students in a higher education institution. PIs currently do not take into account such things as comparison between infection rates following successful operations, or student movements between institutions after successful completion of modules.

Performance indicators that measure results against expected targets are sometimes seen as data-gathering to be used in a carrot and stick situation (Davies and Lampel, 1998). The approach is one which encourages individuals to try to gain the carrot whilst avoiding the stick, and consequently beating the system becomes the aim of the game rather than improving quality.

Another review of NHS performance indicators reported by Sheldon (1998) found that imposed indicators could adversely affect the take-up of quality auditing procedures. The suggestion is that the use of PIs can cause a fearful environment,

where morale is reduced and where those areas, which are less easy to measure, are omitted, thereby causing an overall drop in quality. One example Sheldon uses is that of the water supply companies, where reducing pipe leaks (measurement) by reducing water pressure reduces the number of reported leaks. However, this does not result in a good quality service to the user. He suggested offering the collected data from performance indicators to the stakeholders to see if the data measures what they want. What he is suggesting is that asking stakeholders what is important to them will, in turn, provide better performance indicators.

Another service industry, that of telecommunications, has seen a number of major changes in service provision, including deregulation, global expansion, new technological advances and new services (Oodan et al., 1997). Originally, the sector was driven by technology and improvements in technology, and not by the customers' requirements for a product. There is now a choice of service providers that allows customers to set aside loyalties in favour of a service which best suits their needs. To some extent, these are similar pressures to those affecting higher education (for instance, the globalisation of markets, new customer requirements due to growth in the 'information' society, and the convergence of technology and media). To assist the telecommunication sector in defining quality a definition was constructed on the quality of service:

Quality of service (QoS) is defined in the context of the customer/user or the provider. In the context of the customer or the user, it is defined by the attributes or criteria, which are considered essential in the use of the service (Oodan 1997 p5).

This definition focused on the customer and the needs of the customer, so is hardly any different from a number of other quality assurance definitions, where the customer is 'king' and what the customer wants is what the provider should aim to achieve.

How and what should be measured is challenging to higher education, as stakeholders' perceptions may change at any point. For example, tuition in one class may be seen as excellent based on its didactic approach, whereas the following class may be more student-centred and deemed less satisfactory. As students move around a university their interactions with the teaching staff vary due to personality, mood, expectations etc., and the timing of the evaluation is also affected by the same variables (Santhanam and Hicks, 2002). Student ratings could be considered no more valid than the instrument used to collect the information (Penny, 2003), whereas goods can be measured as fitting the purpose, meeting expectations etc. The needs and wants of the customer, whoever that may be, could also change. In addition, there is little knowledge of exactly who 'the customer' is in higher education. It is difficult to see how systems used for production can be used to measure services. The literature does, however start to bring in the service elements that affect higher education, such as the interaction between user and the service. It is a co-produced activity, where differences between expected provision and received provision can lead to dissatisfaction and defection to alternative suppliers. One way to respond to that would be to make apologies and to put things right, so that people will return to the provider (de Ruyter and Wetzels, 2000).

There has been academic research into the benefits gained by adopting one of the quality assurance procedures discussed in the previous sections however, there has been less research into the benefits of one procedure over another and little comparison of the benefits in an analytical way.

2.5.4 Quality management and higher education

To achieve quality management in a formalised way, some universities such as the University of Wolverhampton adopted systems that were already used in commerce, ISO9000 and total quality management (Doherty, 1994; 1995). Both of these were already favoured by industry especially manufacturing and produced large quantities of documentation. The University of Wolverhampton drew much of its money and students from manufacturing, so it fitted with the local 'culture'. ISO9000 and TQM were acknowledged as leading to increased levels of bureaucracy, something that made the HEI administratively heavy (Doherty 1995). Doherty (1997) recognised that statistical process control had some good points, but that it was difficult to use as a measurement of human outcomes such as education because it is affected by variables outside the measurers' control, including motivation and temperament. He said that the methodology of focusing on the primary consumer (the student) did not get to the heart of the matter, that of the student experience at the subject provider, teacher/taught interface. Doherty saw the post-experience study of teaching as at best only providing logged results when it is usually too late to provide anything more than regrets.

Other quality assurance systems such as total quality management (TQM) do however have advocates in higher education (Chizmar, 1994). Chizmar sees TQM as a way to successfully manage the teaching and learning process, and that by understanding the

views of the customers, which in this case are students, it can provide feedback about the quality of the learning experience. In the TQM model, examination re-sits would then be viewed as a fault in the production design rather than lack of personal motivation, understanding or ability. TQM was also championed by Crawford (1991) to the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities (CVCP). He considered that 'like it or not, universities are in the sordid business of providing paid services to customers.' p.3. He advocated TQM as one way of satisfying student needs and as a method for universities to identify their market niches:

Those who initially deride the idea of TQM in a university setting should at least reflect on the intense intellectual pleasure and professional pride to be drawn from satisfying student needs better. ... universities will be under increasing pressure to state their missions, objectives and goals more clearly, and will progressively be supported only to the extent of perceived national needs in the market niches that they have chosen, and according to the quality that they are believed to deliver. (p.3)

The problem with the models taken from industrial or commercial environments is the fact that they are usually related to production of goods, whereas education is primarily a service provision. It is also common to make links between 'quality' and a process of ensuring quality. A substantial number of the researchers in this literature review have acknowledged the fact that education is like other services in that once consumed the item no longer exists. For example, a meal in a restaurant is consumed, but the staff and the buildings still remain and another meal can probably be provided, although the original meal is no longer available. The meal however, may not have

been to the consumer's taste, it may have been too spicy, or not of expected quality, and the customer may then visit another restaurant in future, but students are less likely to move as easily or readily from one university to another. They are more similar to consumers of health care provision and in particular to residential care provision. Only residential care users have longer-term relationships with providers than students. Students may spend 3-8 years at university, whereas residential care users such as the elderly may spend equal if not longer periods of time as consumers and customers of the provider. Like higher education students, nursing or care home users are not always the ones paying for the care. It may be relatives who are paying either directly or indirectly through taxation and large numbers of care home users are supported by society through national insurance or taxation. Therefore, higher education as a service industry has more in common with other service industries than with the commercial sector. Higher education is a service and, although service research has drawn on several decades of consumer behaviour, there is little substantial knowledge of how consumer evaluations are formed (Mattsson, 1994).

2.5.5 Identified models for assuring quality

From this research there appeared to be emerging models of assuring the quality of products and services that could be analogous to models and approaches drawn from other disciplines. As part of the development of research for this thesis, models were identified under the headings of 'medical', 'accounting', 'engineering' and 'educational' disciplines. I have defined these models in sociological terms, so that the medical model refers to the language of illness and 'making things better' and cures or remedies to stop poor quality production, whereas the accounting model would increase the market share and the development of distance education from the

higher education base. These models can then be tested against the accepted quality assurance models.

- Firstly, there is the ‘medical’ model, which is defined as trying to cure the ills of poor quality and improve the knowledge of why things have occurred without making things worse. This would incorporate such methods as those advocated by Deming and his *Seven Deadly Diseases*. The medical model could be applied to the HEI’s view that student withdrawal requires remedial action where the damage is repaired after the event. For example, where an operation is conducted after the illness has been diagnosed. The HEI researches into why students leave and then makes compensating arrangements for future students.
- Then there is the model of ‘accounting’, where there is a need to improve quality to increase market share and increase income. Examples of quality assurance methods would be Statistical Process Control and Performance Indicators. Measurement of increase in performance in the HE market share could be assessed by the move in the use of more distance education delivery of courses to off-campus students. The advantage of more students studying off-campus is the reduced need to expand physical provision such as student accommodation, whilst at the same time increasing student numbers and increased revenue. This is something that could be attributed to an accounting model of performance measures.

- Next, there is the 'engineering' model, which aims to establish the best way to review quality and apply mathematical modelling or statistical measures to quality assurance. This would include a systems-based approach such as *Six Sigma* (Taguchi, 1986). This model is applicable to the HE environment where student evaluations and higher education league tables are published as statistical measurements of the quality of the university. Assessing the quality of products using this model is easier than the measurement of processes.
- Finally, there is the 'educational' model where knowledge of past events and experience is disseminated and passed on to others, so that the knowledge can be built on, developed and changed to improve quality. Examples include 'best practice' and benchmarking. Higher education has always built on previous knowledge. However problems occur when the institution has some individuals who do not want to change and are resistant to the idea of quality assurance of their practices.

Models are useful in that they provide information on what individuals' perceive as the 'ideal' and how they approach situations with a particular model in mind. A model is usually a personal or subjective entity and is a simplified representation of a person's or a group's view of a situation, to assist in working with that situation in a systematic manner (Morris and Chapman, 2000). Mental models often involve thinking about what will happen in certain situations, e.g. how X will react if I ask her to do a particular job. Implicit mental models can constrain and determine what we perceive in the world around us (Morris and Chapman, 2000). When the 'ideal' model of teaching and learning provision does not occur then students' perceptions

could be those of a poor experience. Students and tutors may also have a 'model' of the type of teaching they are expecting and, if their models are not fulfilled, they perceive a poor teaching/learning experience (Richardson, 1980).

From the literature reviewed earlier in this chapter, it is clear that definitions of quality are primarily product-based within a manufacturing scenario. It is only more recently that the quality assurance of service sector providers has materialised. The major difference is that services are usually intangible, cannot be stored (so there can be no final quality check) and customers are heterogeneous with differing priorities. Service provision is also inseparable from production and consumption. All of the literature in this section points to a perceived gap between what has been received, whether service or goods, and the expectations held by the user or customer. Where there is a mis-match of expectations and received goods or services there is usually dissatisfaction.

2.6 Chapter conclusions

More formalised methods to ensure the quality of products and processes were developed primarily in the twentieth century. These methods originated in a simple inspection-based system which identified 'bad' workmanship and fault repair, which developed into a more holistic approach to quality assurance and quality enhancement.

The concern to assure the quality of higher education had been triggered by the increased need for accountability in a widening and increasing level of provision and take-up. There were also two fundamentally different views of quality: first, as

achieved through competition and increased market share in a combative sense; and second, as improved by a motivation to do better and provide a better experience.

The theories and models in the literature on quality formed three major groupings which were those of satisfaction, attitude and service quality. The satisfaction literature primarily demonstrated an interest in improving the levels of satisfaction with a product. The attitude literature focused on changing the cultural attitudes of the organization and developing holistic systems to assist in assuring the quality of products during the manufacturing process. Both of these areas of the literature are product- and production-centred. The third area of the literature was service quality and this had the greatest potential for impact on higher-education quality assurance. This latter section of the review examined the interrelational aspects of service consumption and delivery, and how these are almost inseparable. In ensuring the quality of higher education there are aspects such as the measurement of teaching quality, which is reliant on perceptions and conceptions of what is 'good quality' which cannot be separated from the relational aspects of service delivery. The theories of disconfirmation demonstrated that perceptions, models and conceptions of expected service, including education, are not always confirmed in the received service delivery. There is a gap between expectations and perceived reality.

In the production industry, goods can be measured as fitting the purpose, meeting expectations etc., however the needs and wants of the customer, whoever that may be, could also change. Additional problems occur in higher education where there is little knowledge of exactly who is 'the customer'. It is difficult to see how systems used for production can be used to measure services. The literature does, however start to

bring in the service elements that affect higher education, such as the interaction between user and the service. It is a co-produced activity, where differences between expected provision and received provision can lead to dissatisfaction and defection to alternative suppliers. The problem with the models taken from industrial or commercial environments is the fact that they are usually related to production of goods, whereas education is primarily a service provision.

The demands to provide information on which judgements of quality can be made were instigated by the government and to some extent by employers. These stakeholders wanted to know what the outputs of higher education added to the economy. There was an element of ‘value for money’ and the need to confirm that the money provided by the taxpayer was being well utilised. This brought about increased use of managerial systems that were usually seen in production industries. The problem is the transference of this model to higher education where academic staff were unused to, and unsure of, managerial control. There appeared to be an underlying wariness of what was to be achieved and measured, why it was being measured and whether measurements made for one purpose (declared) would be used for other (undeclared) purposes. At the same time higher education institutions managed to anticipate what assessors were looking for, which led to a ‘wholesale inflation’ in scores that would lead ultimately to meaningless assessment (Brown, 2004). Emulating the commercial sector, higher education has also moved to a more holistic approach to quality assurance and quality enhancement (QAA, 2002a) in a move to improve the quality from whatever level to an ‘enhanced’ level. There is also a growing notion to move away from accountability to greater improvement of the

teaching and learning experience (Brown 2004 p.73). This move is discussed further in chapter seven on the conclusions from the thesis research.

The main drivers in assessing quality can be seen as those external to the academic institution, such as governments and employers. However, other stakeholder groups have an interest in the outcomes of an increasing level of HE provision. They include students who are the main recipients of the education, academic staff who see their academic freedom being eroded, and alumni and student associations who want to see high levels of teaching quality and student post-graduation employment; all of these stakeholders have an interest in a high quality education system. However, the reality is that many of these latter groups are unable to adequately influence the development of quality assurance procedures, because they have not been included during the development phase, either within or outside of their institutions.

The thesis focuses on the stakeholders in HE and the importance of developing a greater understanding of their conceptions of higher education quality into the quality assessment process. One of the aims of the research was to explore the notion of giving a greater 'voice' to stakeholder groups, such as students, in the development of appropriate quality assurance guidelines, as it was felt that at the time of the study these groups were perceived as having less influence on the development of quality assurance guidelines. Harvey & Green (1993b p.29) noted that stakeholders had 'different perspectives on different things with the same label'. One of the research aims was to identify whether this difference was apparent in the concept of quality for distance higher education stakeholders, and if the guidelines were addressing their perspectives.

In this chapter, I have considered some of the methods and systems used by governments and academic institutions to ascertain levels of quality provision in higher education. It is acknowledged that a lot of the quality assurance literature had little influence on all HE stakeholders, but governments and some institutions were using these types of approaches. However, the literature is important background to understanding certain stakeholders' conceptions of quality. There was a move from the audit culture of the 1980s to quality assessment of teaching and learning (HEFCE) and quality assurance of standards (HEQC) in the 1990s.

Differing governments had different policies for higher education. For example, the Conservative governments of the 1980s had an audit culture of assessing quality and increasing competition in all areas including health care and education. There was a purchaser/provider distinction and internal markets for competition of provision. In the change of government to a Labour/socialist base there was an increased emphasis on improving standards and increasing participation rather than accountability.

The audit culture of measurement in the quality of HE by governments and the need to look at the value gained from the money invested required HE to make a cultural change. There was a need to adopt a culture of using quality assurance and quality control methodologies and the easiest way to do that was to look to commercial and industrial method of quality assurance.

Former polytechnics had a number of these processes in place, possibly due to their greater dependency on industry for additional financial support and the requirement to provide evidence of how the money had been spent and of the quality of their output.

The older institutions on the other hand, had always relied on the students' final qualification and the research of the academic staff as evidence of the quality of their provision.

Quality, has not only measurable aspects, it can also be an ephemeral part of a product or process, such as the quality of a painting or the performance of an opera. These aspects are immeasurable in any standardised format, as measurement of the quality of a Jackson Pollock piece of modern art or the quality of a John Constable painting of rural Suffolk are intrinsic personal value judgements. Although both painters were attempting to articulate their perceptions of their surroundings, one picture will be judged of better quality to some individuals and the other picture will appeal to differing individuals. Quality is therefore based on judgments and expectations that are frequently immeasurable and where many of the systems described in this chapter are doomed to fail in assessing quality of service provision.

This chapter focussed on the process of assuring quality rather than the concepts of what quality is to the HE stakeholders. In the next chapter, concepts of quality are reviewed with particular reference to the work completed in the HE setting and the more recent attempts to measure quality of provision in distance higher education.

Chapter Three – Assuring quality in distance higher education

3.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the key ideas related to quality in distance higher education and the quality assurance processes currently being used by both dual-mode and single-mode institutions. One definition of the differences that distinguish distance education as either dual-mode model or single-mode model is that distance education is the external study away from the university campus (dual-mode) or distance education where there is no student campus base at all (single-mode).

In the UK, the QAA (1999) developed quality assurance guidelines for distance education separately from the guidelines for higher education. However, in the intervening period, there has been a blurring of the boundaries of higher and distance education, and many higher education institutions (HEIs) now offer courses by distance learning. The chapter looks at the growth of distance education and its potential to fulfil a demand for greater access to higher education (HE).

The key questions addressed in this chapter are:

- Is there now a need for the development of a new set of quality guidelines for distance education, and if so, what are the likely benefits for stakeholders?
- There are distance education providers that are not higher education institutions, but deliver educational programmes. Is there a need to find a fresh approach to defining quality for these providers? This section will look at alternative ways that other distance education providers have used to establish the quality of their provision.

- Are there methods or processes that can be adopted to ensure the quality of distance higher education? If so, who can help in developing these methods or processes?

Section 3.2 introduces the criteria used to judge quality in higher education and distance education together with a comparison of the criteria. In section 3.3, there is discussion of the dilemma of defining distance education (DE) quality when there is little or no face-to-face delivery of teaching. It is suggested that the assurance of teaching quality may then become intertwined with the process and content of delivery rather than personal attributes. This suggests that teaching quality is not reliant on a charismatic teacher delivering high quality materials, rather that it is the materials, course design and system of delivery which become paramount in discussing quality.

Section 3.4 describes the growth in markets for DE and some of the other forms and types of quality assessment within and outside the UK. This section reviews the work of agencies who assure distance education, although not all of them assure distance higher education e.g. British Association of Open Learning. Both commercial and educational institutions which recognised the growth in technological development have seen the potential to offer courses within and outside the UK. Finally, consideration is given to how quality can be assured when there are increased forms of provision. The chapter culminates in providing the key research question to be addressed in the thesis.

Before embarking on a discussion of quality in distance education, I will provide a definition of what constitutes distance education. The term 'distance education' is used in this review to mean the type of teaching and learning that is conducted between the teacher and the learner via printed text, electronic methods or any other information and communication technologies and where the teaching and learning is frequently asynchronous rather than synchronous. It is not used as the term for open and flexible learning assumptions made by Rumble (1989), rather it has more similarities to the concept of 'transactional distance' and an educational system in which the learner is autonomous. The learner is separated from his/her teacher by space and time, so that communication is by print, electronic, or other non-human medium (Moore, 1973, 1983).

3.2 Quality assurance of higher and distance education

The QAA aims to ensure the quality of teaching and learning in specific subjects or disciplines for comparison across institutions. It is concerned with students' learning experiences and achievement, as well as the views and expectations of other stakeholders, such as employers. The QAA conducts its evaluation of quality at a very pragmatic process level 'fit for purpose', whereas stakeholders, according to Harvey et al. (1992a), set the criteria of higher education quality at conceptual levels, such as 'exceptional', rather than process levels.

As discussed in chapter two, assuring the quality of products in the manufacturing and commercial sectors developed from a need to reduce wastage and poor production procedures, where it was anticipated to be part of a company's self-assessment.

Higher education is also interested in similar processes to support quality assurance, such as reduction in student attrition and improved curriculum design.

Both higher and distance education quality assurance procedures, as defined by the QAA (1998a, 1999) have similarities, such as curriculum design and student assessment, but there are also differences which mainly focus on the delivery of the teaching. This includes management of programme delivery and student progression. In Table 3.1, the criteria for quality assurance in higher education, distance education and the criteria set out by Harvey et al. (1992a) are presented. As can be seen in the table, governmental initiatives focus on process and rather than concepts. There is less explicit focus in the distance education guidelines on teaching and learning and greater emphasis on delivery, whereas the criteria for quality in Harvey et al.'s research is more conceptual and less process driven.

Table 3.1 Quality criteria 1

Criteria of Quality (Harvey et al., 1992a)	Quality Assessment of teaching & learning in UK Higher Education (QAA 1998a)	Guidelines on the Quality Assurance of Distance Learning (QAA 1999)
Quality as exceptional Quality as perfection Quality as fitness for purpose Quality as value for money Quality as transformational	Curriculum design, content & organisation Teaching, learning & assessment Student progression & achievement Student support & guidance Learning resources Quality management & enhancement	System design Programme design, approval & review Management of programme delivery Student development & support Student communication & representation Student assessment

In the following sections, the criteria of Harvey et al. (1992a) have been used as headings to review the literature relating to distance higher education. The reason for

using these criteria as headings is to consider the conceptual criteria for HE stakeholders and how these may be related to DHE stakeholders' conceptions.

From the review of government initiatives in Chapter 2, there appeared to be governmental influence to increase participation in higher education, to lower the unit of resource and at the same time to adopt innovative ways of delivering the education. There has been a move to a resource-based, student-centred approach to higher education, where the student is less directed and may have reduced access to tutorial staff. In fact, there appears to be greater development of remote delivery of education across all higher education institutions (HEIs) via virtual and managed learning environments. The advent of new information and communication technologies and the World Wide Web has been seen as encouraging new thinking by educational institutions where there is now a view that distance learning is no longer primarily the province of specialist institutions. Increasingly, HEIs are looking at how new technology can support open and distance learning for both their existing students and for potential new markets (Beaty et al., 2002).

The remote delivery of higher education is something that the Open University in the UK has engaged in for 35 years and it has in fact 'legitimised' degrees studied outside the conventional university (Teather, 1987). Growth in the form and types of degrees offered and the widening of participation, including distance education delivery modes, further supported government beliefs that there was a need for increased assessment of the quality of the education provided.

One of the impacts on the evaluation of quality in higher education is the increased level of consumerism and the competitive approach to attracting and retaining students (Wright and O'Neill, 2002). Wright and O'Neill say that education is directly impacted on by the provider and is only as effective or inadequate as the teacher or technology used in its delivery. This places the delivery as the most important part of the service to students. It assumes that it does not matter if the delivery is face-to-face or resource-based. This encourages a move to a focus on 'what works for the customer' in higher education (Wright and O'Neill, 2002). As seen in Chapter 2, higher education has a multiplicity of customers and stakeholders including students, employers, academic staff and government departments.

In the next sections, the stakeholder research of Harvey et al. (1992a) is used to provide subheadings to aid the review of the perceived important aspects of quality in higher education. One of the overall aims of the thesis is to establish whether different stakeholders in DHE do have different concepts of quality and that these are at a conceptual level rather than a process level.

3.2.1 Quality as exceptional

In Chapter 2 attention was drawn to the growth of higher education in the latter part of the twentieth century. After World War II there was a feeling that public services could best be delivered through the state, which would provide a broad equality of provision across the country (Davies, 2000). In the 1980s and 1990s 'equity' was replaced by 'choice' with the increase in a liberal ideology at the expense of social democracy. Individuals were expected to take increased responsibility for their health care and retirement together with student responsibility for contributions towards their education. This was at a time when there was a governmental push to increase student

numbers and to widen access, for a commodity which governments were finding harder and harder to financially support. The demand to increase participation rates in UK higher education to 50% (DfES, 2003a) placed a strain on the resources available, and one way to increase revenue was for students and parents to contribute to higher education through fees and loans. This is not a recent idea, it is one that has existed for at least 30 years:

More radical liberal opinion advocates the use of student loans – a scheme which offers the advantages of ‘giving’ the student himself (and no doubt his parents and advisers) a vital share in the decision about the direction of higher education and what it is worth paying for it.’ (Halsey and Trow, 1971 p.87)

A possible way to reduce resource costs is to provide as many aspects as possible through electronic delivery and the development and growth in access to the technology has enabled that delivery. Many HEIs are therefore looking at distance education as a means of delivering high quality education to a more diverse student cohort. This implies an increased blurring between higher and distance education and an increased need to understand what is seen as ‘quality’ in distance education. One of the ways to do this is to look at what makes higher and distance education ‘exceptional’.

Harvey et al. (1992a) used the notion of exceptional quality as something special, distinctive and embodied in excellence that exceeds a set of required (minimum) standards. This *specialness* is exemplified to many individuals as the *elitist* aspect of gaining a higher education and to enter university makes the individual ‘special’. It is

based on a tradition of rarefied interactions with academics and the opportunity for higher status jobs. More recently, it has been noted that higher education has in fact lost some of its elitist aspects with the continued widening access and availability. It is no longer for the elite, but also the 'charity' cases, who were traditionally excluded from higher education (Northedge, 2003).

Rapid growth in new technologies and the growth of higher education (massification) has led to a feeling of unease and loss of social exclusiveness (Teichler, 2001).

Twenty-first century society has been described as the age of the knowledge economy, where there is intensive knowledge-based competition, in which the most valuable commodities are no longer materials and physical assets, but increasingly information and innovation (Sizer, 2001). An elite education may no longer be access to higher education, but access to computer literacy skills, so that to be 'exceptional' is linked with the quality of delivery system and not the distinctiveness of the buildings or the location of the university.

The elitist aspects and quality in higher education have traditionally been associated with the selection of an elite group with low teacher-student ratios, extensive libraries, state-of-the-art laboratories and local residency (Calder, 1997). Calder suggested the use of traditional indicators of quality when used for distance education is doomed to failure. She found that DE managers had six facets relating to quality, which they defined as: fitness for purpose; student achievement; service to students; conformity to agreed specifications; cost/benefit to student; and total quality management. These have many similarities to those used in the commercial sectors, as outlined in Chapter 2, i.e. fitness for purpose, conformity, value for money and TQM. It should however,

be noted that Calder's findings were derived from only one of distance education's stakeholder groups (DE managers), who could be expected to have an understanding of managerial approaches to ensuring quality.

HE quality in this sense means that the education provided should be something which exceeds minimum requirements and that standards of higher education relate to the exclusivity of the opportunity to interact with academics. The more difficult it is to get into an institution the more some assume it to be of higher quality. The problem for some distance education providers is that they are an open access institution which may be understood to mean that they are not for those individuals who are exceptional.

3.2.2 Quality as perfection or consistency

This aspect, according to Harvey et al. (1992a), is the focus on process and the achievement of 'zero defects' and 'getting things right first time'. The concept of quality as perfection is less easy to define and, in some studies reviewed in the literature, it has in fact been left out in the discussions of Harvey et al.'s concepts (Lomas, 2002). For a course or degree to be perfect would also imply that it was perfect for every student, which is impossible as some students may have inadvertently chosen the wrong course. Alternatively, the systems for perfection maybe in place, but the service delivery was poor. Thorpe (1995) suggested that course designers need to take into account the pressure on students, their study time and their wish to succeed in the assessment system to provide a high quality course. If it were possible to achieve this, then performance indicators on rates of attrition

would mean that course designers/academics would be able to see where courses are not perfect or achieving the students' goals and thus make appropriate changes.

To reduce attrition and offer a programme of degree courses that are consistent in delivery and presentation is problematic enough, but at the same time the student body is changing and the demands for new and vocational degrees are increasing. It is also recognised that students may have additional needs, previously mis-understood or mis-diagnosed. e.g. dyslexia.

Yet, institutional responses have often gone little further than offering 'remedial' support to 'weak' students. In effect, non-traditional students have been treated as 'charity' cases to be rescued from ignorance. The stately home of elite education is simply extended by adding a large paupers' wing. 'Proper' students continue to define the norms, whilst the rest tag along behind as best they can. (Northedge, 2003 p17)

This might also be applied to distance education and higher education, where the elite students receive the 'best' education in the 'stately home', because they can afford to attend university, and the 'paupers' are relegated to the distance education 'wing'.

Bottomley et al. (1995) researched the intrinsic reasons as to why DE universities are relegated to a low position on a quality scale. Their main argument is that of socio-economic reasons for distance education. They argue that if a country could afford mass elite higher education then there would be no distance education, there would only be one form of quality education. Bottomley et al. suggested that at the time of their research there was a perception by 'elite' providers that distance education was

for those students with no other option and for poorer countries that could not afford mass higher education. There is an underlying assumption in this notion of distance education that it is an open entry system which attracts and admits students who cannot gain access to elite education (Teather, 1987). Bottomley et al.'s argument is supported by Allen (1993) who referred to the lack of credibility of distance education as a quality institution for Asian students. Where DE students had lower expectations of the type of education they would receive (Yellen 1998) and where distance education is often seen by students as the poor relation to HE (Thorpe, 1995).

There appears to be an assumption that high quality and perfection are in some ways related to an elite HE and not to DE. However, I would argue that if quality is related to consistency, as Harvey et al. suggest, then DE with its standardised material development and distribution is nearer to achieving *zero defects* than other forms of higher education delivery.

3.2.3 Quality as fitness for purpose

Exponents of this approach argue that quality has no meaning except in relation to the purpose of the product or service (Harvey et al., 1992a). Quality is judged in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose(s). It is also developmental as it recognises that purposes may change over time thus requiring constant re-evaluation of the appropriateness of the specification. Fit for purpose in the commercial sector relies on customers' conceptions that the provision fulfils expectations and is fit for the purpose it was designed to achieve. To fulfil its design specification customers are expected to give feedback on whether the product was 'fit for the purpose'.

The terminology used in higher education has to some extent changed, and this includes seeing students as customers and courses as products (Parker and Jary, 1995). This has led to an increased reliance on student evaluations, where students are able to say whether the product was fit for the purpose it was designed to achieve. However, students' evaluations are notoriously problematic (Santhanam and Hicks, 2002, Penny, 2003). For example, student ratings of teaching are influenced by students' own perceptions of good teaching. If that perception is underpinned by a notion that learning is absorbing information to pass examinations, then this perception creates an expectation by the student that influences the ratings of teacher effectiveness (Penny, 2003). Student evaluation of teaching in Australian universities, is routinely used for the purpose of promotion and tenure in 'traditional' delivery modes (Timpson and Andrew, 1997). However, students have differing approaches to learning and these impact on their evaluations of teaching and therefore the appropriateness of the criteria 'fit for purpose'. If Timpson and Andrew are correct in this assumption, then the evaluation of the teaching may be deemed not 'fit for the purpose' for which it was purchased, where the student's goal was to gain a course pass and a higher education qualification, if that student fails to achieve this goal.

Understanding DHE stakeholders' conceptions of what makes the educational experience 'fit for purpose' is therefore fraught with difficulties including student expectations of the provision. The benefit of establishing whether fitness for purpose is one of the concepts for DHE stakeholders is that the concept of 'fitness for purpose' could be included in quality assurance guidelines and student feedback.

3.2.4 Quality as value for money

At the heart of this criterion is the notion of accountability to the funders and customers of higher education and clear specifications of what can be expected for the money paid (Harvey et al. 1992a). During the 1980s the British government's higher education policy demanded an outcome of value for money and questioned the idea of the traditional student living away from home at the state's expense, since this allowed university buildings and equipment to be unused for parts of the year (Hardy, 1996). At the same time, there was a move to a neo-liberal economic policy of individual responsibility, rather than the social democratic policies that dominated following the Second World War. Since the Conservative government lost power in 1997, neo-liberal policies have continued with New Labour's stakeholder economy founded on the concept of social responsibility, where many interest groups have a 'stake', not always financial (Burkitt and Ashton, 1996).

In HE there are multiple stakeholders, many of which, including employers, are affected by the outcomes of the education. Some stakeholders are opposed to institutions which are internally-driven rather than having a functional definition of the needs of the country (Doherty, 1997). In a market economy, students are no longer thought of as recipients of welfare, but purchasers of an expensive educational product (Morley, 2001), and the cost to students could then be influential on their HE purchasing power. Students and other stakeholders could then be looking towards other teaching delivery methods as ways of cutting costs or otherwise reducing financial outlays.

Many providers of distance education suggest that DE could be extremely cost-effective, as long as it is delivered on a large enough scale, despite the high set up costs and the investment required (Melton, 2003). Economies of scale, time resources and production costs of developing DE materials can be high before they achieve a break-even point (Back and Timmers, 1991). However, there is a perceived cost effectiveness of e-learning (electronic delivery of courses and teaching) (Roffe, 2002). One which the UK Education and Skills department (DfES 2003b) sees as enabling education leaders to develop innovative ways of deploying their resources through the exploitation of e-learning alongside other teaching methods, to achieve improved quality and economies of scale. At the same time, there is also the fear that new technologies will increase academic unemployment (Bengtsson, 1993), again adding to academic fears, not only of increased managerial control, but also the reduction in the number of staff needed to deliver a course.

Feigenbaum (1983) suggested that for most buyers, higher-priced products have usually meant higher-quality products, and Ritzer (1998) sees lower class students as attending the 'McUniversity', which would provide fast-delivered, quickly digested and affordable education. He is using the term McUniversity in relation to McDonalds fast food outlets, where the aim is to provide the consumer with food that is consistently the same and at a reasonable cost, anywhere in the world. Ritzer argued that universities are a means of educational consumption and that students are adopting a consumerist orientation, where they expect education to be nearby and to operate at convenient times for their consumption. In the 'fast food' notion of university education, it is convenient, available when required, and has a replicable standard (Parker and Jary, 1995, Ritzer, 1998). It is the type of university which

employs part-time contractual staff to do the teaching, because they are more likely to accept less pay and less favourable working conditions, because the staff make the assumption that this work will eventually guarantee a permanent position (Parker and Jary, 1995). Parker and Jary viewed higher education as becoming a fast food outlet which sells only those ideas that its manager believes will sell, and where HE will start to treat its employees as too devious and stupid to be trusted, so that the formality of the rational process for ensuring quality will be increasingly valued.

The literature indicates that ‘value for money’ also influences the type of educational provision and who purchases DE or HE. Students may make choices of educational provision based on their available financial resources and the notion of ‘keeping down costs’. This in turn could affect the choice of distance education over higher education or *vice versa*. If it is too costly to leave home and attend a campus-based institution, then there may be the perception that the quality of the cheaper ‘local’ institution is poor or that studying at a distance whilst in employment is one way of keeping down the costs of studying. It could be that DE and the provision of traditional university courses to students studying at a distance would allow students greater access to ‘high quality’ institutions.

3.2.5 Quality as transformational

The transformative view of quality is rooted in the notion of ‘qualitative change’ (Harvey et al., 1992a). The example given by Harvey et al. was that of ice, which is transformed into water and eventually steam with the increase in temperature. The notion of transformation can then be either empowering the consumer to influence his

or her own transformation, or enhancing the consumer by effecting changes in the HE participants.

Cross (1981) stated that the majority of people interested in upward mobility in the labour market think that education is the best way to achieve their goal, and hence it has transformational abilities. She referred to work, education and leisure as concurrent activities, rather than alternating at points throughout life and saw adult education as forming part of society where it is influential in the growth of a learning society.

The increase in the level of student uptake of education could be seen as the opportunity for individual transformation from unskilled to skilled participant. Alan Tuckett (1997) referred to the economic needs of the UK and its association with lifelong learning to constantly transform the collective intellect:

There is now a widespread consensus that it is going to be central to the economic well being of the UK for us to create a learning society. The arguments are familiar. In an increasingly global economy, there is a marked economic advantage for societies with skilled, adaptable and learning workforces. (p.1)

Where lifelong learning is

now understood to mean the continuation of conscious learning through-out the life-span, as opposed to the idea that education stops at 16, 18 or 21. (OECD, 1996 p.89).

There was an obvious push from the UK government to achieve a better-educated workforce, which raises questions about the reasons for attempting this task and to whom it is targeted, so that they can be 'transformed'. There is still the under-utilisation of educational opportunities which affects how many people are 'transformed'. For example, in a report from the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) Tuckett (1997) indicated that although 46% of adults say they would like to take part in some learning activity, only 33% said that they think they would actually take part. The people that do join in adult and continuing education are mainly middle class and often, have already received some further learning. Tuckett reported that few adult learners were unemployed, without qualifications or working class, and very few were from ethnic or linguistic minorities. However, it is clear from the NIACE report that adults are independent learners who are passively learning from television documentaries and the media in general, but are reluctant to take up the opportunity of formal education.

The widening of access did not appear to be happening at the rate originally desired by the government and Tight (1991) felt that there was a mis-match between what is factual and what people believe about HE participation:

It is widely believed that for HE to be really valuable it has to be full time.

Indeed, this view is so prevalent in this country that many people believe that the only form of HE available is full time. (Tight, 1991 p 112)

Tight and Tuckett are both suggesting that lifelong learning has not been seen as the great provider of opportunities and transformation that the government suggested, and

that the people who took part in their Adult and Continuing Education studies still believe that education is for someone else and not for them.

It is perceived by some sociological researchers that through education there is a growing evidence of a wider range of social benefits, such as increased social cohesion and indirect benefits to the macro-economy, by, for example, reducing the costs of social security and criminal justice systems (Newby, 2003). The benefits according to Newby also included better health, parenting, civic engagement and a more egalitarian attitude amongst graduates. The enhancing and transforming of individuals is then a perceived benefit to all of society, where higher, distance and adult education is a necessary part of a responsible community and where governments, employers and other stakeholders have come to expect education to contribute to the development of a variety of complex 'skills'. Skills that it is hoped will enhance the national economic well-being and promote graduate employability through contributions to the stock of human capital (Knight and Yorke, 2003).

Distance higher education has the perceived potential to 'transform' more people due to its ability to reach those least able to attend a 'traditional' institution, who might be constrained due either to location, or circumstances.

To re-cap, this section has reviewed the recent research into the concepts of quality as related to DE and HE. Quality of HE according to many researchers including Harvey et al. (1992a) is that quality is at a conceptual level for HE stakeholders. By monitoring process, the QAA may be missing the criteria that stakeholders are using when evaluating quality in HE or DE. Harvey et al.'s work has brought into the HE

quality arena the discussion of concepts rather than managerial measurement. It is one of the aims of the thesis to bring about the same discussions relating to concepts of quality for DHE.

The next section considers the variety of distance teaching and learning available in the UK.

3.3 UK Distance Education

In Chapter 2 (section 2.2.1), the governmental demand for the growth in student numbers was discussed together with the first notions for the development of distance education. Distance education as a form of part-time study is not new: there have been correspondence courses, such as Pitman Shorthand, since the late nineteenth century, and part-time study has been available for many years from institutions such as Birkbeck College in London which has offered part-time degrees to students who were employed during the day since 1920 (Commonwealth University Yearbook Vol. 3 1995).

There has been continued interest in delivering higher education through distance learning, and the development of the UK's successful Open University has attracted attention from many parts of the HE sector. The growth in technology has meant that more individuals have increased access to video equipment, digital video and personal computer equipment. The latter usually includes access to the Internet and provides individuals with the opportunity to study more easily from home and in their own time. HEIs are now considering the impact of computer and information technologies not only on their 'traditional' student intake, but also as a means by which they can

increase student numbers without increasing the physical size of the institution. In fact, DE has become widely accepted by the higher education sector as a means to satisfy demands for independent learners and attempts to widen access, even if the student misses out on the 'charismatic' lecturer (Curran, 1997). There is now the view that open and distance learning is no longer the province of specialist institutions, and higher education institutions are increasingly looking at how new technology can support open and distance e-learning for their existing students and for potential new markets (ESRC Series, 2002).

One model of distance education is that operated by the UK Open University (UKOU), and as the largest UK provider of Distance Education, it has an important role in this area of research. The UKOU introduced a system of tutor-supported open learning, which was based on the provision of a comprehensive and coherent structure for degree and professional qualifications for students studying at a distance.

Students are not required to have formal educational pre-requisites, and may enter at any level of undergraduate study. Each module or course of study traditionally consists of a media mix: text in the form of interactive workbooks, audio and either video or broadcast television programmes. More recently, use is being made of electronic mail and computer conferencing systems for interaction with both tutors and other students on selected courses. The study of the material is supported by tutorials, and students are assigned to a personal tutor. The original criterion for studying with the Open University was that students only needed a letter box to receive their course materials, and it is still the ethos behind the University that it is 'open to all'. Open University students usually complete their course of study as part time students, and as such have other roles and responsibilities beyond their studies

(Jelfs et al., 2004a). As adult distance education students they are frequently employed, contributing taxes and labour to the economy, and with little or no governmental contribution to their course fees. These considerations may have increased the interest governments had towards distance education when they wished to increase the numbers of students whilst at the same time did not want to increase the fee support provided to HEIs.

According to Nunan and Calvert (1992) education at a distance is closely linked to government goals for mass education and, in fact, is an instrument for achieving these goals. Therefore, students are seen as achieving goals for social equity, lifelong learning, workplace education and links with industry through employment. There is general acceptance that more and more providers are becoming interested in distance education and that includes companies where in-house training and courses are offered through the intranet (Barker, 1999). However, Tait (2003) points out how open and distance learning methods mask the fact that employees are expected to achieve lifelong learning primarily in their own time, where employers cannot see them attending an institution, but provide learning opportunities through such initiatives as blueU (<http://www.blueu.com>), LearnDirect (www.learndirect.co.uk) and Corous (www.corous.com).

There are variations to the fully tutor-supported open learning institution such as the UKOU, including dual-mode universities. The development of dual-mode universities can to some extent be linked to technological advancements. Virtual learning environments (VLEs) usually combine e-mail, bulletin boards and chat room, together with collaboration tools such as on-line forums, electronic diaries and calendars.

They may also include on-line assessment, on-line courses, library resources and for managed learning environments (MLEs) the integration of management information systems (<http://www.becta.org.uk/research>). The aim is to provide student centred information systems that are fully accessible from multiple locations. The MLE should be integrated to ensure interoperability between administrative and financial systems, learning support and learning environments (http://jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=mle_realted_joined).

This has also led to entrepreneurs entering the market place and the increased development of VLE/MLE providers such as Blackboard™, WebCT™, Learnwise™ and other electronic providers e.g. online books (<http://www.pearsoned.co.uk/elearning>).

Perceived advantages of MLEs include a wider access to teaching, greater efficiency in administration and the integration of data across the institution (JISC's MLE Landscape study accessed 21/11/03). The main disadvantages to institutions include the set-up costs and time involved, the cultural change, increased staff development needs, stable infrastructure and data security. However, there are the perceived long-term advantages of using MLEs including increased student retention, improved standards of delivery and improved student recruitment (JISC 2003). At the same time dual-mode universities have been required to develop internal quality assurance protocols that demonstrate that the distance education programmes are of equal quality to those delivered by traditional methods (Roffe, 2002).

The Education and Skills department's strategy for the future of e-Learning (DfES, 2003a) included the notion that it will empower learners who will take more responsibility for their own lifelong learning, and that teaching will be more creative and develop new ways of teaching. A further assumption about the benefits of these technologies is that their use will permit instruction to become better tailored to students' individual educational objectives (Schmidtlein and Taylor, 2000). For many students and tutors the move to the use of ICTs is not as unproblematic as this view might suggest (Jelfs and Colbourn, 2002a; 2002b). Often both students and tutors are ill-prepared and lack the necessary skills to take part in the technological delivery of teaching and learning.

Williams (1993) found that students chose distance education for the perceived advantages of a reduction in travelling to a study centre; that it would be less intrusive on family life; that it gave clear early statements of assessment; and it removed the embarrassment of mature age or non-English speaking background. However, there are a number of restrictions, such as time demands and pace of study. Kember, Lai and Murphy (1992) found that students are not predestined to succeed or fail based on their entry characteristics, but that progress is influenced by the quality of the course, the academic support environment and the degree to which the student is able to mesh the demands of academic study with work, family and other factors.

The quality of distance and higher education is also dependent on students' perceptions of the teaching and learning that is provided by institutions. There is the assumption that students tend to consider studying in countries which are information rich, such as the US, Britain and Australia (Bourke, 2000), where reputation is focal

and students tend to opt to study abroad firstly by looking at the host nation and then select an institution. Those with high entry requirements (Oxford, Cambridge, Wharton, Harvard) are perceived to be the best. The QAA (2003) recognises that Europe and other parts of the world have made demands for closer policing of transnational higher education. The changes that they see as influential include the development of European standards, changes to the European Credit Transfer System, the General Agreement on Trade in Services, together with the World Trade Organisation's negotiations to liberalise international access to higher education markets.

At the time of writing, governmental initiatives are pushing forward the idea of e-learning and its exploitation as a means of delivering education (DfES, 2003b). There is a feeling in the Education and Skills department that e-learning can raise standards and widen participation in lifelong learning, not as a replacement for teaching staff but as an enhancement to their teaching quality and an increase in the ability to reach and attract students into lifelong learning.

Section 3.3 highlighted the growth of DE in England and the growing use of technology to deliver many aspects of a course for both on-campus and off-campus students in the next section the review turns to competition within the educational 'marketplace'.

3.4 Markets and distance education

A market consists of buyers and sellers that trade in its commodity, and here this refers to higher education. To compete effectively in the marketplace an educational

institution needs to differentiate itself from its competitors (Joseph and Joseph, 1997). Differentiation is reliant on distinctiveness and an assumption that what is being received is not only 'different' but of high quality. In higher education, Joseph and Joseph (1997) factor analysed student feedback questionnaires and found seven factors that students said they wanted from a university when making choices of one institution over another. These factors were: programme issues; academic reputation; physical aspects/cost; career opportunities; location; time; and, other (e.g. family). The most important ratings were given to academic reputation, once again returning to the notion of an 'elite' university. Joseph and Joseph suggest that future research should be conducted with other customer groups, such as employers, government, the general public and internal customers to ascertain whether they hold similar views on the factors that students want from universities.

According to Morgan (1993) market share is not the concern of the student, who is more likely to make judgements based on intrinsic needs about 'what sort of teaching/learning do I get? Am I being fairly judged? Are the qualifications recognised outside?' The recognition of qualifications is acknowledged by many university accreditation units, both within and outside the UK, and is something that is recognised by distance education quality assurance agencies worldwide. For example the British Association of Open Learning (BAOL), the Council for the Accreditation of Correspondence Colleges (now known as the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council), and the European Association for Distance Learning (formerly known as the Association of European Correspondence Schools), have all developed guidelines or codes of practice to assure the quality of the materials or education provision of their courses (Jelfs, 1999).

The UK's HEQC first became aware of concerns about institutions' overseas collaborative arrangements in 1993/4 and most problems seemed to have been with private education providers (Brown, 2004). A number of agencies throughout the world have considered the practicalities of a set of criteria, guidelines or code of practice for distance education providers on a global or regional basis. Setting up such guidelines has its own problems and difficulties however, some attempts have been made, for instance BAOL has developed a *Quality Kitemark* to assure the quality of the qualification providers. It is based on the quality of the necessary systems to provide a satisfactory experience. Further studies in the use of 'kitemarks' as standards in provision found that an approved 'kitemark' had many perceived advantages as it could be included in the institution's headed paper or quoted in the prospectus and advertising literature. It was found to be advantageous in the world of 'branding, and market segmentation' where institutions want to stand out from the crowd (Jelfs, 1997, 1999), and a 'kitemark' with renowned approval could be one way of gaining more of the market share.

The Commonwealth of Learning has shown an interest in developing quality assurance guidelines. As an intergovernmental organisation which was established in 1987 by the Commonwealth Heads of Government, it works on behalf of member states across all sectors of education from basic literacy to continuing education. It aims to use distance education methods to assist member Commonwealth countries to meet the demands for access to a quality education and training. It is not only in the British Commonwealth and Europe, but also in the US that the importance of ensuring the quality of distance education is being considered and reviewed. In America, the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) accredits institutions, as achieving

certain standards. It accredits a wide range of institutions from military colleges to those allied to medicine. Institutions can voluntarily approach DETC after two years of unaccredited operating experience, and are accredited through self-evaluation reports.

There is also the appearance of ‘degree mills’ on the Internet and the dubious legality of some awarded degrees (Santos, 2002). The fact that non-official higher education is not subject to the national mechanisms of quality assurance in the host country raises problems of transparency and control (Santos, 2002). In the UK, the Trading Standards department is encouraged to follow up suspect operations and the British Council are informed of suspect providers in their regional locations.

There are obviously concerns in many of the major countries, either concerns about quality of courses (Calvert, 2003) or concerns about the quality of the international provision of education (Evans, 2003). To combat these concerns there has been the growth of a number of quality assurance agencies. The Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE) provides quality assurance certification for transnational education programmes. ‘Transnational’ is seen as any form of teaching or learning in which the students are in a different country from the one where the provider is based. GATE defines itself as having the primary purpose of addressing and improving the quality of education that crosses national borders. To achieve this aim GATE has developed a code of practice containing a set of principles for transnational education. An institution can request GATE to review its transnational education programme, after which certification can be achieved. GATE suggests that certification offers not only individuals, but also governmental agencies a check on

the quality of the education being exported or imported. Quality assessment in most countries has been adopted due to the increase in mass higher education and the reductions in the levels of support funding (Brennan and Shah, 2000a, 2000b).

Sometimes things go wrong and distance education courses are deemed as being of unsatisfactory quality. For example allegations were made by the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education about the quality of provision to Israeli institutions by the University of Derby (QAA, 1998b, 2000). The QAA report (1998b) indicated that the university had not managed the process of delivery well, or ensured that the students had appropriate qualifications to take part in the course. Prior to taking on the Israeli delivery, Derby University had had little experience of running franchised programmes of study. There was an assumption that because such courses were of acceptable quality for on-campus studies, then they were suitable for overseas provision. However, cultural differences and academic differences, including assignments that were written in Hebrew, had not been anticipated, and this compromised the quality of the course to the student. The University was moving from traditional higher education teaching and learning to a dual-mode presentation with little previous knowledge. One conclusion is that there are differences between distance teaching and traditional face-to-face higher education teaching, which can make the transition to a dual-mode institution problematic.

3.5 Assuring distance education teaching quality

The quality control and assurance systems currently used in distance education were developed and practised from the early quality assurance of learning materials (Lewis,

1989), and the monitoring of teaching and study centre tutorial visits (Tait, 1993).

Writers such as Tait (1997) commented on the industrialised nature of educational systems in open and distance learning, which encouraged more 'quality control' than 'quality assurance'. By that, he is inferring that there is an overall tendency to check on performance after it has been completed, rather than to build in a commitment to meet the needs of users and continuously improve. At the same time, he viewed quality assurance as bringing about culture change to an organization, which is time consuming in its 'techno-rational' approach to the excitement of learning and teaching. Tait saw quality assurance as 'a managerial weapon to enforce subservience and have the effect of reducing creativity and independence of thought, particularly damming in the educational sphere' (Tait, 1997 p2). This leads to the construction of education as a commodity, with its providers as competitors in a market (Tait, 2003).

One argument is that the student is a university's customer. However the notion of the student as a customer is not 'ideology free', but belongs to a larger agenda of the endorsement of neo-liberal approaches to policy that are dominant in industrialised countries (Tait, 2003). This implies that the government's need to widen participation has led to the understanding that education is a commodity which can be purchased, and with it an expectation that stakeholders can influence its market share.

Teaching expertise has been primarily associated with accomplishment in the lecture-hall or the seminar room, and staff development initiatives have tended to be directed towards improvements of this aspect of teaching performance. Distance teaching is to some extent different, because it can be very public if privileges of access to courses and course materials are reduced, allowing other students to take part in discussions,

tutorials etc. For example, researchers such as Mayes (2001), see openness to course materials as having implications for staff and students as he sees this as the first time in educational history that the outputs of the learning process are recordable, storable and open to judgement. This is in fact incorrect due to the openness of the OU's materials and their use by many academics in 'traditional' institutions.

Tutorials, according to Anderson (1997), are claimed to be arenas where active learning can take place and where students are encouraged to think more independently and gain confidence in their own abilities in democratically run discussion groups. Anderson paid very little attention to those that are not able to develop these skills and he is fairly dismissive of those students who are ill prepared for studying. He found that there was strong disapproval expressed by peers for those who came to tutorials unprepared, and that as students become more experienced in tutorials they had differing needs. For him, tutors have the 'power' to direct the tutorials and to include or 'put on the spot' the quieter students (this might be classed as bullying and intimidation in some quarters). This in turn might influence student perceptions of the course and perceptions of teaching in both HE and DE, if students expect to be supported by the tutor.

In JISC's Landscape study (2003) quality control procedures for teaching and learning content are considered as difficult for individual institutions to develop, embed and sustain as there are few precedents to study and very little documented guidance in an educational or non-commercial context. JISC recommends quality control as valuable for learning materials and is an area that requires further study. However, other researchers have a more open approach to teaching and learning

materials, where property rights of materials become irrelevant and open to all (ESRC, 2002). This would be extremely thought provoking for many academics in traditional higher education, if their materials no longer belonged to them.

The need to explore the perceptions of various stakeholders in distance education to provide a greater range of possible indicators of quality is recognised by Nunan in a number of papers (Nunan, 1991; Nunan, 1993; Nunan and Calvert, 1991; Nunan and Calvert, 1992). Nunan and Calvert (1992) argued that the characteristics of distance education are no different from those of education in general, but they do not explain what those characteristics are in a 'traditional' higher education context. This is contrary to the findings by the QAA of Derby University's distance education provision, where the lack of experience on Derby's side played some part in the poorness of the distance education provision. However, Nunan (1993) states that the norms for evaluating ideal teaching and learning environments are derived from the face to face modes of education and that distance education fails on that score, but it does better in creating independent learners which is not assessed by quality assurance agencies. There is the argument that DE students are more discerning due to the student age range, their experience of paid employment and their general higher independence (Tricker et al., 2001). The discerning student may identify weaknesses in the teaching material and the tutorial staff, however if there is a perceived difficulty by the student then it is harder to correct due to the time delay between the actual interaction and the ability to correct the situation (Tricker et al., 2001). However, I agree with Smith (2004) that students are a valid and reliable source of data about their DHE experience.

3.6 Measuring the quality of distance higher education

So far in this chapter there has been discussion about quality assurance for higher education and for distance education what is needed is discussion of how these might be used or how they affect DHE quality assurance.

In quality assurance the dominant model is based on technical-rational paradigm, which places importance on instrumental variables that are easily observed and monitored (Gore et al., 2000). Again, this is based on the notion that it is easier to judge quality on measures of items, rather than through conceptual understanding of what quality is to the stakeholders involved. The professional-artistry paradigm views education and quality as a practical art, which stresses contextualisation of quality from a multi-stakeholder perspective. 'Unlike the technical-rational paradigm, this approach views quality and quality indicators as temporary, dynamic, problematic and contextualised rather than absolute and permanent' (Gore et al., 2000, p77). Therefore there is a need to gain understanding of what comprises quality from a multistakeholder perspective.

The differences in the goals of the quality definitions were highlighted by Knight and Trowler (2000) and identified as Type I and Type II (Table 3.2). They suggested that Type I is useful when applied to operations that are well defined, such as telesales centres and assembly-line production and in higher education for routinisable procedures such as processing admissions and maintaining student data. However, they see most academic teaching staff as working in environments that are non-routine where they are required to make expert decisions and where the environment

needs people who are flexible and adaptive. This is where Type II ‘quality is quality for change’ (p112) is needed.

Table 3.2 Quality as Type I and Type II (Knight & Trowler, 2000, p111)

Quality Type I	Quality Type II
Efficiency = ‘lean and mean’	Effectiveness: spaces and redundancy
Emphasis on measurables, typically outcomes	Emphasis on processes
Binding, well-specified procedures	Binding, well-rehearsed goals: procedures open
Tight coupling: hierarchies and low-trust cultures	Loose coupling: workgroups and high trust cultures
Compliance: errors punished	Creativity: errors are necessary for learning
Motivate by rewards and punishments: extrinsic	Self-actualisation and fulfilment matter: intrinsic motivation
In practice, emphasis on single-loop learning	Signs of double-loop learning (and more besides?)
Linear view of the social world: direct cause-effect connection	Complexity view: attractors constrain causes, interactions make effects unpredictable
‘Rational’ view of communication and planning	Communication as sense-making, planning is far from rational

Gore et al.’s (2000) contextualisation of quality from a multi-stakeholder perspective and Knight and Trowler’s view that there are different types of quality that are applicable in different circumstances leads to the notion that different stakeholders in DHE would have differing views of quality and how it can be measured. If it is accepted that stakeholders’ conceptions are different to each other (for example, where client organisations in a business school are understandably concerned with ‘fitness for purpose’ and ‘value for money’), whilst educators share a notion of quality as a transformational process (MacFarlane and Lomas, 1999). Then educators could see quality in terms of their input, whereas the client organizations assess quality on the basis of output or outcomes.

When researching students as DE stakeholders, Long et al. (2000) found that there are gaps between what students are looking for and what they experience that can ultimately lead to dissatisfaction. This gap between the service provided and the

service expectation is something that Zeithaml et al. (1990, 1996) tried to address in their work on assuring quality in other service industries. Barrett (1996) argued that students want support systems such as excellent registration processes or the turnaround of exam results to ensure the smooth running of their administrative needs. Something Barrett referred to as the 'just add an egg' completion of a task with the least amount of effort, but the one that gained the most satisfaction results from the students. He suggests that satisfaction is based on the reliability of systems, rather than the whole course or university experience. Measures of satisfaction frequently rely on information gained from student surveys on their perceived quality of the provision and if Barrett is correct, then satisfaction is based on processes rather than concepts.

Questionnaires are frequently used as part of quality assurance of distance and higher education, where it is assumed students can be objective and knowledgeable (Cresswell and Hobson, 1996). In fact relying on end of course student evaluations that are only short term feedback from current students is problematic as it can only improve the course for the next cohort and not the present one. One of the problems of using surveys for the measurement of quality is that it is inferential, in that people infer a value judgement based on numerical representation and although many surveys have a section for open-ended personal comments, these are often not analysed in any depth (Garcia et al., 2004). Due to the pressure of accountability, there is also the temptation to seek out only that information which is amenable to statistical representation.

The QAA's recent emphasis is on outcomes rather than processes, which indicates a move from fitness for purpose to an interest in fitness of purpose and an external review process that adopts an audit trail approach (DfES, 2002b). Its aims are to provide 'information which students, parents, employers and other stakeholders need on the quality and standards of different HEIs and programmes. The approach must test whether HEIs' internal procedures really are effective in setting, monitoring and enhancing quality and standards of all programmes' (p1). The QAA is looking for the institution's strategy in raising the quality of learning and teaching and less concerned with **what** is quality in teaching. It is for the audit teams to make judgements about the institution's quality assurance arrangements and that they are operating in a way to ensure 'acceptable quality and standards of teaching and learning' (p11).

Distance Education providers, such as the Open University, are now part of the QAA's audit trail and there appears to be a tendency to see distance education delivery as 'more mainstream'. If distance education provision is no longer separate from higher education, then there is a need for only one set of guidelines. The benefits would be a more systematic and comparable set of findings which would support stakeholders' expectations. As pointed out in Chapter 2, there is concern in the service quality sector that there is a gap between expected and received quality of service. Integrating the perceptions of educational stakeholders into the development of any guidelines would, hopefully, reduce the gap between expected and received outcomes.

It might be argued that quality in any system should be viewed chiefly or solely using academic criteria, especially in the field of research (Kekäle, 2002), but Rowley

(1997) suggested that any attempt to measure quality in general terms should take into account all stakeholders' perceptions, and mass higher education has led to an increase in the number of directly related stakeholders. This implies that all stakeholders should be included in any discussion of conceptions of quality for distance higher education.

3.7 Chapter conclusions and research question

At the beginning of this chapter the key questions to be addressed were:

- Is there now a need for the development of a new set of quality guidelines for distance education, and if so, what are the likely benefits for stakeholders?
- There are distance education providers that are not higher education institutions, but deliver educational programmes. Is there a need to find a fresh approach to defining quality for these providers? This section will look at alternative ways that other distance education providers have used to establish the quality of their provision.
- Are there methods or processes that can be adopted to ensure the quality of distance higher education? If so, who can help in developing these methods or processes?

First, it is clear that there have been major developments in quality assurance since the time when guidelines on distance education were instigated (QAA, 1999). Given the recognition by the government and quality assurance agencies that stakeholders needed to see the quality of higher education and its outcomes, it is surprising that Harvey et al.'s (1992a) work with stakeholders was not more highly represented in the measures used to assess quality when the QAA developed its guidelines.

The assumption of a number of government and non-profit organizations (mentioned earlier in this chapter), seem to be that adults will actively seek out new learning experiences for lifelong learning, and will do so through distance (e-learning) education. Studies have been conducted into how students come to take part in DE (Beaty and Morgan, 1992) and they found that at the start of their studies students rely on the provider to control and direct their learning. It could be said that DHE with its more formalised system of delivery and production would provide the necessary student support in their learning. By judging DHE as the separation of teacher and learner, Marsden (1996) infers that we are forgetting that part of the role of 'teacher' is the DHE material, particularly text. If that is true, then the distance between the student and the teacher is irrelevant, as the materials support and guide the student in their learning (see Rowntree, 1992, 1994, 1998), and the delivery is the most important part of the service to students (Wright and O'Neill 2002).

In answer to the second question posed in this chapter, other distance education assurance providers such as GATE and BAOL were considered. They had developed a number of 'kitemarks' or supporting codes of practice, which are again more in keeping with quality assurance procedures through an audit trail. There has been little development in the quality assurance of teaching, particularly of what is increasingly becoming more recordable, storable and open to judgement (Mayes, 2001).

Finally, there appears to be no clear cut method or process that could be used to ensure the quality of distance higher education. There are guidelines on DE quality and HE quality, but with the increased blurring of the boundaries between distance and higher education, there is the possibility to define one set of quality assurance

guidelines. This provided the opportunity to attempt to define one through appropriate research into DHE stakeholders concepts of quality. As Teather pointed out, respondents from single-mode universities rated the overall quality of their departments (or schools) more highly than did respondents from dual-mode universities (Teather, 1987, p.199). It could therefore be expected that the stakeholders in single- and dual-mode institutions would have differing views and rating of distance education. In an attempt to ascertain whether this assertion is borne out in UK distance higher education, the thesis research was conducted with stakeholders from both modes.

Reviewing the literature on higher and distance education quality assurance, there appeared to be the assumption of a top-down approach to quality, where governmental agencies, such as the QAA provided guidelines, so that HEIs aimed to satisfy the assessment. From the review, there were a number of interrelated issues. In particular, the assumption that stakeholders have differing perspectives on different things with the same label and perhaps different stakeholders place different levels of emphasis on certain aspects of 'quality' in higher education. Governments wanted to ensure the quality of HE through standards and measurements to ascertain that the educational provision was value for money. Students as stakeholders wanted an education that would transform them as individuals, but would have the pragmatic value of providing employment opportunities. Academics were up until the 1980s, unused to quality measurements and guidelines and their educational provision had traditionally been unchallenged. They were unused to having their teaching questioned or challenges to the content of the course. Higher education was 'exceptional' and only for those who could achieve specific academic standards

through competitive examinations with their peer group. Employers as stakeholders in HE needed to see what the outcomes were from the provision and the relevance of the education to their needs as employers. This led to a number of changes in academia including the development of Business courses for many HEIs. Course developers needed to attract new students and increase and widen participation through providing courses that were wanted by students and employers. The market was the basis on which they based quality assurance and perceived a course as being of good or poor quality.

These findings led to the main research question:

What are stakeholders' conceptions of quality in distance higher education?

In the thesis the term 'perception' is used to denote not only an internal feeling or sensory excitation, but also that it has reference to an external cause. The term 'conception' is used when someone's opinion, belief or personal view is built and formed from a number of previous experiences.

However, when engaged in discussions of quality, behind the use of apparently common terms, meaningful exchange can only occur because of the other person's interpretation of what is being said (Neave, 2002). In the next chapter, qualitative research approaches are considered and particularly the use of phenomenography and phenomenology as ways of eliciting and interpreting stakeholders' conceptions of distance higher education quality.

Chapter Four - Research approach

4.1 Introduction

Previous research into quality assurance systems was discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 and attention was drawn to the notion that stakeholders' conceptions of quality were important for policy-making initiatives. As identified in those chapters, quantitative statistical information gathering methods were the primary source of data for both commerce and higher education. It is the aim of this chapter to provide the rationale behind the research decisions to use qualitative methods in this study and the reasons for adopting a particular approach, namely phenomenological phenomenography. The development of phenomenography as a research tradition is discussed, as are the reasons for using a phenomenological approach within a phenomenographic tradition.

Throughout the remainder of the thesis, conception and perception are not used interchangeably as in Marton's work (1994a), so using one of them does not stand for the other. In the thesis the term 'perception' is used to denote not only an internal feeling or sensory excitation, but also that it has reference to an external cause. The term 'conception' is used when someone's opinion, belief or personal view is built and formed from a number of previous experiences.

The thesis research is into stakeholders' conceptions of DHE quality, where teaching and learning are primarily seen as aspects of education. Previous experience of teaching and learning may affect what stakeholders' perceive has happened in a particular situation or interaction, and what they feel should occur in a teaching and learning situation. This in turn, could affect their conceptions of DHE quality.

The justification for a qualitative research method and the phenomenological approach to phenomenography are:

- Stakeholders' views of teaching quality were previously conveyed and based on quantitative studies, e.g. course satisfaction surveys, which provided a broad understanding of the numbers of stakeholders holding particular views. There was less understanding of 'why' stakeholders held some specific views. In the quality assurance of higher and distance education, teaching quality is one of the hardest perceptions to measure and requires further insight into stakeholders' conceptions of what they think constitutes high quality education (Chapter 3).
- A phenomenographic approach and a qualitative study of stakeholders' conceptions of distance higher education quality offered the possibility to explore issues that may have been too complex or subtle to investigate through quantitative means.

In the following section, I discuss the rationale for studying stakeholders' views of teaching quality and the difficulties that arise in attempts to study other people's conceptions.

4.2 Rationale

Chapters 2 and 3 identified that there was a multiplicity of stakeholders that could be affected by the quality of DHE. It was decided to further scrutinise the groups of stakeholders as a basis from which to select informants. The rationale was based on their relationship and ability to influence teaching quality assurance measures in distance higher education. Three groups were identified on the following basis: those with the least ability

to influence the quality assurance measures, but with greatest personal investment in the education provided (group one); those stakeholders with moderate influence and moderate ability to interpret the guidelines to the provision of DHE, and who also had some personal investment in the provision (group two); and those who were the stakeholders with the greatest ability to influence, develop and interpret the guidelines, but were the furthest removed from the direct effect of DHE teaching quality (group three). From this the following grouping was formed:

Group one – Students, tutors and alumni.

Group two – Course developers, senior tutors, and student union representatives.

Group three – Quality assurance guideline developers, employers and guideline interpreters.

Therefore, these were the stakeholders investigated in the study. The study did not lend itself to a hypothetico-deductive model of research, in which the objective is to develop a hypothesis for testing. Rather the term ‘research question’ is used to define the formulation of the question to be explored in the study (Mason, 2002). The aim was to gain an understanding of DHE stakeholders’ conceptions. There is no prediction, defined in advance, rather it is a study that allows stakeholders’ views to emerge.

If it is accepted that we all have differing points of view, and from these we construct differing realities, which are not contrary to each other, but are separate from each other, we can then accept that every person has their own viewpoint and lived experience based on their own reality. Humans construct a shared workable reality, a necessary part of living in a social world, through discussions with each other and consensus. This workable reality means that when conversing with each other individuals establish a given understanding of the topic.

A research method of semi-structured interviews provides the possibility to allow for these discussions and understanding to take place and the illumination of stakeholders' conceptions and perceptions. The data collected could then provide evidence to be used as an explanation for specific views. The aim of the research was not to generate a theory of quality in DHE, but to gain an understanding of the plural realities that people adopt when engaging in distance higher education and their perceptions of what affects quality.

Understanding stakeholders' conceptions of 'quality', when the term is used to refer to teaching in DHE, was one of the aims of the thesis. However, quality is a relative concept to the stakeholders in higher education (Harvey and Green, 1993b), and how individuals use the word and what it conveys to them poses difficulties for the researcher. If there are differing understandings of what constitutes 'quality' held by different stakeholders, then a research method that would highlight differences appeared to be the most appropriate.

Humans do not simply perceive and experience, they perceive and experience 'things', which are sorted into conceptual categories. For example, Heritage (1984) discussed the different uses of the word 'Rover' to illustrate the range of procedures and considerations by which ordinary members of society make sense of, find their way about in, and act on the world. 'Rover' can be viewed as an animal, a vertebrate, a mammal, a dog, an Airedale, a friend and as a companion. The construct 'dog' may be sufficient for the purpose of buying dog food, but it is the practical purposes and the relevancies that interpret the way 'Rover' is used. However, problems may occur when people share common experiences of the natural and social world, and then find difficulties in how they interpret these experiences and communicate about them. Heritage suggested that no two human beings could ever have an identical experience of anything, but that we assume that our experiences are similar and act as if they were identical. The example Heritage gave was

that of the idealisation that ‘we both see the same flying bird’, in spite of the difference in spatial position, gender, age and the fact that one person wants to shoot it and the other to enjoy its flight. It is the perceptions, values and experience, which determine how an individual views an object (Schutz, 1967, 1970). However, both Heritage and Schutz are discussing how people view objects or ‘things’ rather than concepts, such as quality. In my view, it is much harder to discuss ‘conceptions and perceptions’ of quality, than to discuss ‘perceptions’ of objects.

A discussion of stakeholders’ perceptions and personal views by Neave (2002) again outlined the notion that because discussion is about the same ‘thing’ then assumptions are made about having similar ways of looking at the world.

First is the presumption that because we both subscribe to the same nominal expression, we are essentially talking about the same set of phenomena, procedures and, no less important, that we entertain similar ways of looking at the world... We are speaking, outwardly, about the same thing – say accountability. Yet, what our interlocutor understands often lies in his or her meaning, not in ours. (p.17)

Understanding what is meant and interpreted in our daily interactions relies heavily on a shared consensus of meaning. When it comes to abstract concepts, such as quality, then this is more problematic. Entwistle (1997) demonstrated the idiosyncratic way in which abstract ideas are understood when he introduced students to differing conceptions by asking them to explain words such as ‘antidote’ or ‘justice’. He found that there was no clear consensus, although all students understood the words and were able to apply them appropriately. The conclusion was that as humans, consensus of meaning is derived from social interaction. Mis-interpretations and the difficulties of discussion of abstract ideas

were posited, therefore there is a need for a research approach that is applicable to discussions about the concept of ‘quality’ and one that is appropriate for education.

4.3 Qualitative research methodologies and design

In contrast to the large-scale data collection of quantitative research, qualitative research is frequently cited as providing in-depth investigations into the nature of social and organisational behaviours. It uses exploratory and interactive methods of data collection in order to capture the form, complexity or origins of the phenomena under review. The advantages offered to the research by a qualitative study was the opportunity to consider the diversity and range of individuals’ conceptions. Further, it offered more opportunity to gather data as evidence on which to base any findings.

Qualitative research provides the ability to describe experiences, behaviours and views rather than measure views and outcomes, which is the focus of quantitative research.

However, within qualitative approaches there are differences of emphasis between those researchers who believe that there is a world ‘out there’, which can be accessed through the use of particular techniques and those who believe that this world is socially constructed by the researcher and other participants (Grbich, 1999). The first group believe the researcher can participate in and document the outer world with minimal intrusion, while the second group believe that the perceptions of the researcher and other participants are intricately inter woven. The thesis research fell into the second of these categories, because of the apparent construction of a common understanding of reality, so that individuals could converse in a shared reality, i.e. that of quality assurance systems. Many researchers would say that how you study the world determines what you learn about it (Patton, 1990), therefore, choices were made in the light of the aims of the research into DHE quality. This

included, how to select the target groups and to select the most appropriate research method and methodology to gain the most insight.

In this section, the main qualitative research methodologies and the theories underpinning their design criteria are reviewed. In the first part of this section, the major traditions of qualitative research are considered before a more detailed review of phenomenology and phenomenography in sections 4.5 and 4.6. The following table was adapted from Cresswell's work (1998) as it provided a clear overview and an introduction to the discussion on the research approach. Due to the nature of this study, biographies and case studies were omitted from further discussion, but are provided here for completeness of the overview of research traditions.

Table (4.1) An overview of the most widely used qualitative research traditions

Dimensions for Comparing Five Research Traditions in Qualitative Research					
Dimension	Biography	Phenomenology	Grounded Theory	Ethnography	Case Study
Focus	Exploring the life of an individual	Understanding the essence of experiences about a phenomenon	Developing a theory grounded in data from the field	Describing and interpreting a culture and social group	Developing an in-depth analysis of a single case or cases
Discipline origin	Anthropology History Psychology Sociology	Philosophy Sociology Psychology	Sociology	Cultural anthropology Sociology	Political science Sociology Urban studies
Data collection	Primarily interviews and documents	Interviews	Interviews with 20-30 individuals to 'saturate' categories	Primarily observations and interviews with additional artefacts	Multiple sources, documents, records and observations
Data analysis	Stories Historical content	Statements Meanings Meaning themes General description	Open coding Selective coding Conditional matrix	Description Analysis Interpretation	Description Themes Assertions
Narrative form	Detailed picture of individual's life	Description of the 'essence' of the experiences	Theory or theoretical model	Description of the cultural behaviour of a group or individual	In-depth study of a case or cases

(adapted from Cresswell, 1998 p.65)

Cresswell's overview highlighted the fact that, no matter which approach, the interview as a research tool is perhaps the most widely used of qualitative social research techniques, and as Osborne (1994) pointed out, the majority of qualitative methods have a phenomenological component, i.e. asking participants to reflect on their stated views, without calling it phenomenology.

Criticism of the use of qualitative data collection is widespread, particularly the acknowledgement that all data is filtered directly through the eyes of the data collector (Borman et al., 1986; Patton, 1990). One of the criticisms therefore, is that the results can be considered as too intuitive, personal and individualistic due to the researcher's closeness to the data. To counter act this criticism, researchers need to 'bracket' (Ashworth and Lucas, 1998) or take periods of time to 'step outside' of the data and become self-critical or seek the comments of other researchers or colleagues as an aid to clarification or the refining of questions. In this respect, I must thank my supervisors and colleagues who provided critique and demanded informal clarification of my interpretation.

One other argument is that qualitative studies by their very nature cannot be replicated due to the real world changes. This criticism can also be applied to quantitative studies, as respondents in replicated research would also have been affected by real world changes.

Attempts were made to make the process and the design choice clear, so that although the study could not be replicated in the sense of everything staying the same, the process could be replicated. To do this notes were kept and each design decision made was recorded, in a retrievable format, to enable others to inspect the procedures and protocols developed during the data collection (Herschell, 1999).

4.4 Design choice

This thesis aimed to gain an understanding of DHE teaching quality as perceived and conceived by differing groups of stakeholders. One potentially relevant method was to review stakeholders' interpretations of the word 'quality' using hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek word meaning 'to translate', and contemporary hermeneutics is concerned with the ways informants explain, translate and interpret perceived reality. It is used to interpret and recount accurately the meanings that research participants give to the reality around them. Studies are framed by descriptions of, explanations for, or meanings given to phenomena by both the researcher and the participants rather than by the researcher alone. Emile Durkheim (1982) referred to the ways in which people interpret the things around them as:

Man cannot live among things without forming ideas about them according to which he regulates his behaviour. (p. 60)

Once again, there seemed to be the notion of an individual socially constructed reality. One argument is that conceptions of reality are discursive practices, which may be used as sources in particular communicative encounters rather than psychological entities that reside in the minds of individuals (Richardson, 1999). One interpretation is that understandings of reality are shared only as a means of communication and not as shared entities. We can put ourselves in someone else's place and, even if we do not have direct knowledge of that situation, we can imagine what it is like to be in their place. Like all interpretative research, hermeneutics shares a concern for meaning (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993), and therefore, hermeneutics was a potential method for analysing and collecting data. However, this putting oneself in someone else's place does not allow the individual under scrutiny to describe their personal views. They are always interpreted by

the researcher. It is a joint description and not one that emerges from the research participant.

Hermeneutics was rejected because it did not address the underlying conceptions of 'quality', rather it focused on the use or meaning of the word in discursive situations. The hermeneutic focus would be on how the word 'quality' was used and not the underlying conception of what makes something of 'quality' to the individual. Phenomenology claims to describe the phenomenon rather than interpretation or elucidation which hermeneutics attempts to construct.

Other appropriate methodologies for data collection were also considered and those included grounded theory and ethnography. Ethnography is frequently cited as a social scientific description of people and their cultural basis (Vitch and Lyman, 1998) and proponents of ethnography such as Hammersley (1990) argue that ethnography is closer to the nature of human behaviour because of its methodology and methods of gathering naturally occurring data. Hammersley (1995) considered that ethnography allowed theory development to be pursued in a highly effective and economical manner and was less interventionist and more interpretative than other qualitative research methods. As ethnography is used to investigate social processes in everyday settings rather than those constructed for the purposes of research, the danger that the findings would apply only to the research situation is generally thought to be lessened.

Ethnography does, however, continue to be identified with attempts to define a culture as a whole (Baszanger and Dodier, 1997), something that is not the aim of this thesis. It also requires naturally occurring behaviour, such as classroom observation, whereas the thesis

is based on understanding stakeholders' conceptions of quality in distance higher education. Conceptions that are rarely articulated in everyday life. Ethnography was felt to be unsuitable for this particular research study because it focuses on naturally occurring behaviour rather than understanding of the formation of concepts from prior experiences. Grounded theory as a methodology was also considered. Grounded theory was seen by its main proponents Glaser and Strauss (1968) as the discovery of theory from data and a method to find a meaningful theory to account for the behaviour of individuals. Grounded theory emphasised interpretation rather than 'giving voice' to the researched. The grounded theory approach attempts to determine what symbolic artefacts (objects), gestures and words have for groups of people as they interact with one another. The researcher then aims to construct a theory on the participants' social reality (Morse, 1994). Strauss (1987) emphasised the thrust of grounded theory as an approach to qualitative data in the development of theory without any particular commitment to specific kinds of data.

Today grounded theorists differ in their approaches depending on their stance and alliance to either Glaser or Strauss. This is because Glaser and Strauss ended their research partnership, which led to the development of two major divisions within the school of grounded theory. Strauss adopted the method of data analysis through codified, almost word for word analysis where theory emerged from the codes, whereas Glaser focused on the data to 'find what have we here?' (Stern, 1994). The increased interest in grounded theory has been attributed to Corbin in making grounded theory more accessible due to her writing style (Stern, 1994). This accessibility meant that grounded theory gained a wider audience due to Strauss and Corbin's explanation of the procedures involved, such as note taking and memoing (Strauss and Corbin, 1997). It was felt that grounded theory had drawbacks for this particular research, primarily because the study did not entail constructing a theory to account for stakeholders' conceptions and behaviour. Rather, it

was an attempt to establish whether there were any clear distinctions between differing individuals' or groups of stakeholders' conceptions of quality. I was not interested in building a theory of why stakeholders held specific conceptions, but to consider the differing viewpoints of differing stakeholder groups on their conceptions of quality in DHE.

Research into conceptual differences required a reflective approach and one which attempted to elicit stakeholders' often tacit understanding of 'quality'. Phenomenology had the potential to address these needs and in the following section, there is a more detailed account of phenomenology. It was felt there was a need to expand on the methodology and theory for greater clarification of the research decisions made during the course of the study, and because there are frequent mis-understandings of the terms phenomenology and phenomenography.

4.5 Phenomenology

The beginnings of phenomenological research are attributed to Husserl (Husserl, 1964/1907, 1970/1934) and Heidegger (1967) as well as the adaptation of the method to behavioural sciences (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). Husserl defined it as the study of how people describe things and experience them through their senses. It describes the structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness. Every experience can be subject to reflection, as indeed can every way in which we occupy ourselves with any real or ideal objects. For instance, thinking or feeling, so when we are fully engaged in conscious activity, we focus exclusively on specific things, thoughts, values, goals, or means involved. Only through reflection do we become 'conscious' of them, and for this reason, they are called 'phenomena'. Husserl said that initially all our understanding comes from sensory experience of phenomena and descriptions of experience and interpretations

are intertwined. The things themselves appear in the individual's life world through their experiences and perceptions of what has occurred and is understood through the senses.

Husserl saw phenomenology as the study of structures of consciousness that enable consciousness to refer to objects outside itself, whereas Heidegger claimed that phenomenology should make manifest what is hidden in ordinary, everyday experience.

Phenomenological philosophy holds that experience involves the operation of active processes. This includes not only the objects of perception, but also those of memory, imagination and feeling (Polkinghorne, 1989). It is often thought that the world and the objects around us exist independently of us and that what we experience is just that – 'out there' (Valle and Halling, 1989). However, it is not always interpreted as 'out there'.

Previous sections in this chapter indicated that reality is often constructed, and where all of human thinking is linked to something (Willis, 1999). When an individual is thinking, that person has to have something as an end point to the act of thinking.

From a phenomenological perspective, all objects of consciousness, whether referred to in the real world (as in a chair) or to an ideal world (as in the case of the prime number 7), exist as the products of constitutive acts of consciousness (Heritage, 1984). In order for consciousness to *be*, it must be open to an object. The object can be specific (pencil) or general (justice), real (bread) or fictive (Centaur), amorphous (the sky) or defined (a triangle) for the intentional relationship (Giorgi, 1997). People need to be able to define an experience and, in phenomenology, the term used to describe a person's experience is 'essence'. Essence is giving an experience a name, so that the person can identify when anger is anger or when sorrow is sorrow. Essence is a way of calling an experience a kind of name (Giorgi, 1989), giving certain stable moments to a flux of experiences. The intentionality of consciousness is the idea that consciousness is always directed toward an object, therefore phenomenologists focus on how humans put together the phenomena they

experience in such ways as to make sense of the world (Schutz 1967, 1970; Patton, 1990).

A phenomenologist would see people as irreplaceable in that no one can live people's lives for them or experience exactly what they experience (Becker, 1992).

A phenomenologist assumes that first person experience is a valid source of knowledge and that people's everyday experiences contains rich insights into phenomena.

Person A may view a painting and call it ugly, person B may view the same painting and call it beautiful. For person A, the painting will have all the phenomenal properties of ugliness, and for person B, it will have the phenomenal properties of beauty. However, from a phenomenological perspective no claim is made that the painting is in itself either ugly or beautiful; only its presence for the experiencer counts, and an accurate description of the presence is the phenomenon, and it usually contains many phenomenal meanings. (Giorgi, 1997 p.236)

Again, this refers to the same understandings that Heritage (1984) put forward, that people's conceptions and perceptions are referential.

Phenomenology cannot be construed as a method, it is an approach by philosophers who wanted to reaffirm and describe their 'acting in the world' (Schutz, 1967, 1970) or 'being in the world' (Willis, 1999). Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenological philosophy was based on how individuals refer to objects outside of themselves and how they are experienced. Not all philosophers interpret phenomenology as a research method and research that is reported as phenomenological is a challenge to the philosophy, which usually necessitates 'bracketing' and 'reflexivity' to allow the researcher to reflect on what they know. Reflexivity is described as the turning back of the individual's experience so that it becomes a source of insight (King 1996; Ahern, K. 1999; Schwandt 2003), for

example my experience of distance education as an employee of a single-mode institution.

‘Bracketing’ is called epoché by phenomenologists, such as Husserl (1964/1907) and involves the realisation that the researcher is part of the studied social world and requires the researcher to ‘bracket’, or stand apart from their experience.

It is difficult for the researcher to ‘bracket’ and be ‘reflexive’ to personal experience and for that experience to have no influence on the phenomenological study. To counteract this, Ashworth (2001) suggested that reflexivity has three elements:

1. Information is a co-product of researcher and researched. The researcher introduces the topic, even if the responses of the participant lead to a total reformulation of the topic’s meaning.
2. The researcher has a determinative role in interpretation. The researcher construes the researched’s account, even if the attempt is to convey precisely the intention of the research participant.
3. Reflectivity – reflexive consciousness and self-awareness on the part of the researcher.

Therefore, it is acknowledged that the aim of the researcher is to stand outside of the study, and that it is a co-product between the researcher and the participant.

Patton (1990), suggested that a researcher could employ a general phenomenological perspective and ask participants to reflect on their experiences, without undertaking a phenomenological study. I could understand the importance of using methods that capture people’s experience of the world that focused on the essence of shared experience. This is an important consideration because I wanted to understand stakeholders’ interpretations

within a particular context, not their shared experience. I wanted to know if there were any clear differences in stakeholders' conceptions of DHE quality.

In the next section, phenomenography is reviewed as a research approach, because it initially appeared to offer the thesis research a methodology for interpreting the qualitatively different ways in which stakeholders' perceive and conceive quality in distance higher education and particularly teaching quality, where 'teaching quality' is the actual activity perceived in DHE.

4.6 Phenomenography

The earliest types of research to be described as 'phenomenographic' were a series of investigations carried out in Sweden. The phenomenographic research approach evolved from the work begun by a team of researchers in the Department of Education at the University of Göteborg, Sweden, where its main advocate was Ference Marton. Marton and his colleagues were interested in researching the experience of learning in a qualitative manner, in part as a reaction to the then dominant positivistic, behaviouristic and quantitative research being used (Svensson, 1997).

The University of Göteborg team identified limitations in existing research methodology, particularly when the aim of research was to identify the qualitatively different ways people understood a phenomenon. Their phenomenographic research revealed that when a group of students read the same excerpt from a passage of text they understood it in a limited number of qualitatively different ways (Marton and Säljö, 1984). The students expressed different understandings of the same material, and this variation in understanding could be clearly arranged by researchers into discrete categories (Renström

et al, 1990, Marton et al., 1993). The assumption was that in order to understand how people act in the world, account has to be taken of the world as they see it. 'In order to make sense of how people *handle* problems, situations, the world, we have to understand the way in which they *experience* the problems, situations, the world' (italics in original) (Marton and Booth, 1997, p111). Phenomenography, according to Marton (1997), was no more than a 'cousin-by-marriage' of phenomenology and was not a research method in itself, but an approach to research that has a strong educational interest.

The development of the phenomenographical research approach and the word 'phenomenography' has been credited to Ference Marton and first appeared in Marton (1981). Later Marton referred in a debate with Giorgi that the term phenomenography was used to make the approach distinct from other approaches: 'We just needed that. It's like if you are selling shampoo. You have to have a catching name. This is what we were up to.' (1998a, p24)

This 'branding' of difference from phenomenology led, to some extent, to his differing descriptions of phenomenography. For example, Marton has referred to phenomenography as a research specialization aimed at the mapping of the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise and understand various aspects of, and various phenomena in, the world around them (Marton, 1988a). He has also referred to phenomenography as a research approach where the objective was to identify and describe the various ways in which people experienced certain phenomena in the world (Marton, 1981, Marton et al., 1993).

Marton has referred to modern phenomenology as basically methodological rather than philosophical, whereas phenomenography was substance-oriented (Marton, 1981). Marton appeared to see the roots of phenomenography as lying in the interest in describing phenomena in the world as others see them, and in revealing and describing the variation therein especially in an educational context. However, he firmly stated that phenomenography was not an offspring of phenomenology (Marton, 1988a).

Marton stated that phenomenographers try to characterize the variations of experience, whilst for phenomenologists it is the essence of experience that is interpreted and common to different forms of experience. In personal communication (July 2004) Marton stated:

Phenomenography has links with phenomenology that can vary in strength.

Andy Giorgi would probably argue that phenomenology is better at capturing ‘the lived experience’ while phenomenography is designed to capture ‘conceptions’.

(personal communication July 2004)

There has been constant interaction between Ference Marton as a pedagogist and Amedeo Giorgi a psychologist, both of whom are interested in learning, albeit from different approaches. Giorgi first associated with Marton in 1975 (Giorgi, 1986) and their contact and relationship continued through reciprocal sabbaticals. Marton can be classified as a pedagogist who is interested in understanding how students acquire concepts relevant to classroom learning. Whereas Giorgi is a psychologist who is interested in learning experience as lived in everyday life. In 1984, Marton spent a sabbatical year at the same university as Giorgi in Pittsburgh. Marton acknowledged the impact Giorgi had on his thinking through an initial question he posed to Giorgi, that of seeing a car (Giorgi, 1998a). Giorgi’s response was that Marton assumed that the car was independent of sight, whereas

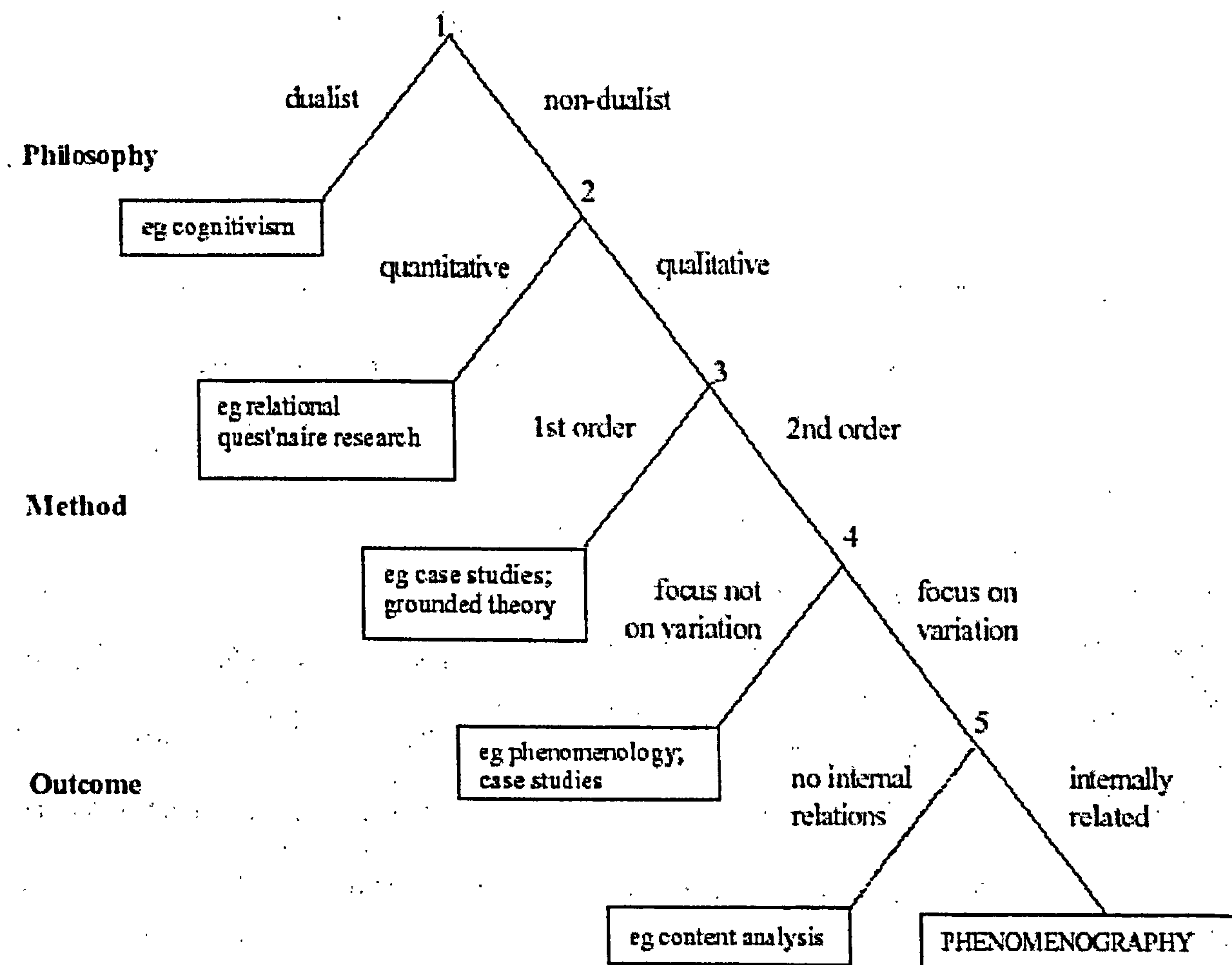
there is a generic explanation that as you grow up you learn to see cars, so that you see that object as a car. Giorgi is claiming a non-dualist approach, where there is no independent context and person. This non-dualistic approach is one that Marton has used throughout his phenomenographical research. Therefore it could be argued that phenomenology did play some part in Marton's development of phenomenography. In fact, phenomenology appeared to offer a philosophical rationale for the programme of research that Marton and his colleagues were using (Richardson, 1999, p.63).

Although Marton (1988a) firmly stated that phenomenography was not an 'offspring' of phenomenology, he later acknowledged that the aim of studying learning was to describe it through the eyes of the learner (Marton, 1994b). The phenomenographic approach is defined as relational or non-dualistic as well as a second order perspective (Marton, 1981; Linder and Marshall, 2003). This appeared to be very similar to phenomenology. Other researchers have also noted the similarity between phenomenology and phenomenography in respect to Husserl's distinction between the essence and existence of a phenomenon (Uljens, 1996, p.119). This non-dualist approach is a research approach that Trigwell (2000) discussed in his paper on phenomenography.

According to Trigwell (2000), phenomenography is used to describe the key aspects of the variation of the experience of a phenomenon rather than the richness of individual experiences. This would then yield a limited number of internally related, hierarchical categories of description of the variation (outcome space) where the 'outcome space' is the 'space of variation' as experienced by the participant (Åkerlind, 2002). Trigwell (2000) provided a very useful diagram to support his description, shown in figure 4.1. In this diagram, Trigwell pointed to the ways in which phenomenography is a separate entity from

other research methodologies and approaches. He referred to phenomenography as non-dualist, reliant on the interviewee's experience of a phenomenon and focused on variation.

Fig 4.1 Phenomenography: defined using points of departure
(Trigwell, 2000)



Trigwell (2000, p.78) defined the points of departure from other research methods noted in the diagram as:

1. Phenomenography is non-dualist rather than dualist. Reality is not seen as being 'out there'. It is constituted as the relation between the individual and the phenomenon.
2. Qualitative rather than quantitative: phenomenography is philosophically or methodologically qualitative.

3. Second order rather than first order. In a first order approach, the researcher describes the phenomenon as perceived by him or her, whereas in a second order approach, it is the experience of the phenomenon as described by others.
4. Focus on the variation. Phenomenography focuses on the key aspects of the variation in the ways a phenomenon is experienced. This is fundamentally different to other research approaches, because the focus is on the differences, aspects or ways of experiencing a phenomenon which are common across the whole sample are not incorporated. This results in an outcome space, which is a partial description of the experiences of the phenomenon, rather than a full rich description as might be expected using a phenomenological approach. Secondly, because the focus is on variation in ways people experience a phenomenon, the study must include a range of individual's experiences, and the sample is selected to maximise possible variation. This is similar to 'essence' as a phenomenological idea.
5. Articulation of the internal relations between the different ways of experiencing a phenomenon. It is this element that distinguishes phenomenography from outcomes with lists of essentially unrelated categories, such as content analysis.

Trigwell's visual representation provided an interpretative description of where phenomenography departed from other research methods.

To aid clarification in terminology, for the remainder of the thesis the term 'second-order' conceptualisation is used to refer to the focus on the experience-as-described, by participants rather than on either the psychological process generating the experience or the 'facts' themselves (Marton, 1991; Ashworth & Lucas, 1998).

There has also been criticism of Marton's point of view, i.e. that the descriptions by interviewees can be interpreted as experiences (Säljö, 1997). Säljö argued that Marton's work relied on the assumption that utterances in an interview situation are synonymous with experience, whereas utterances could merely be a response to a question or a wish not to lose face when confronted with an abstract or difficult question (Dennett, 2003). Saying there is a limited number of ways in which we experience a phenomenon can just as easily be accounted for by saying that there is a limited number of ways of talking about a phenomenon that are perceived to be relevant to the situation. As the speaker chooses the words, how s/he uses them also depends partly upon the way that person interprets the words and partially upon the knowledge of his or her listener's interpretive 'habits' (Schutz, 1967). For words to be used by someone they must already have an interpretation that is understandable by the speaker and the listener (Schutz, 1967). Säljö argued that phenomenographers collect, observe and analyse discourse, and to him the interesting question is how people learn to mean something through the language they have used in everyday practice (Säljö, 1997). What Säljö is suggesting is a re-engagement by phenomenographers in discursive practices, and he is arguing against a reduction of language as representative of the interviewee's reality. This is important to the research of this thesis, because the interviews aim to bring about reflexivity, but at the same time could be subject to interviewee intentionality either to please the interviewer or to focus on one particular aspect.

Marton suggests that following up on what a person says in the interview brings about 'a deeper, more thorough exploration of the person's way of experiencing the phenomenon in question' (Marton, 1997). In these 'Notes' Marton says that people are, as a rule, unaware of the acts through which they relate to the world around them and the aim of the interviewer is to find out about the different ways of experiencing a certain act. This

reflexive turn has to be brought about by the researcher. Thus, for Marton reflection is separate from action in the world or participation and has to be abstracted. This approach has been adopted particularly by Australian influenced phenomenographers such as Prosser, Åkerlind and Trigwell. Their general approach is to ask participants to reflect on their teaching or learning. The different ways of understanding phenomena are categorised according to the awareness shown and not to the beliefs that people hold (Åkerlind and McKenzie, 2003a).

Marton (1997) claimed that the phenomenologist wishes to describe the person's lifeworld 'the world in which he or she is immersed and which the phenomenological methods bring to light' (p.117). He suggested that the difference between the approach a phenomenologist would take is that he or she would ask 'How does the person experience her world?' whereas the phenomenographer would ask 'What are the critical aspects of ways of experiencing the world that make people able to handle it in more or less efficient ways?' He suggests, in that particular paper, that the difference is the logical analytical hierarchy of the outcome space, which phenomenologists do not attempt to achieve. The assumption of an outcome space therefore appears as the central tenet on which phenomenographic findings are based.

There is intentionality and experience and the phenomenography of learning is the *internal relationship* between individuals and phenomena and discernment of the learning object (Linder and Marshall, 2003). Marton (1997) refers to this as:

- External horizon

The way in which the phenomenon is discerned (delimited) from and related to a context (or different contexts).

- Internal horizon

The way in which parts of the phenomenon are discerned (delimited) from and related to other parts and the whole. What parts are discerned and which are focused, figural, in the foreground, thematized and which are non figural, understood, in the background.

<http://www.ped.gu.se/biorn/phgraph/misc/constr/handout2.html> (11/08/03)

Discernment of the learning object implies that although there can be changes in the view, (for instance that one aspect can be the focal point and at another time is in the background), it does not explain how frequently, when looking at ambiguous figures, there is an automatic switching between one and another. The example used by Richardson (1999) is that of the Necker Cube to demonstrate the intentionality of perception.

Phenomenography has made a move from an approach to a theoretical model, a move that has more recently been acknowledged by Marton and Pang (1999). They said that there has been a 'shift in emphasis from methodological orientation to theoretical concerns. These two faces of variation are just like the head and tail of a coin, which represent different facets of the same object of research' (Marton and Pang, 1999 p.13). This recent development of phenomenography from an approach to a theoretical model was a logical progression to support a practical approach.

In fact, phenomenography has been described as an approach that aims to identify the qualitatively different ways in which different people experience, conceptualise and perceive phenomena (Marton & Booth 1996). The different ways in which phenomena are conceived was of interest, as were stakeholders' differing perceptions and conceptions of quality in DHE. At the root of phenomenography lies an interest in describing phenomena

in the world as perceived by others, especially in an educational context (Marton and Booth, 1997). As other people's perception of phenomena was one of the study aims, phenomenography was an appropriate research approach to consider. Marton and Booth (1997) claimed that phenomenography was not a method, nor a theory of experience, rather that it was an approach to identifying, formulating and tackling certain types of research questions, a specialisation that is particularly aimed at questions of relevance to learning and understanding in an educational setting.

After long deliberation and reviewing other qualitative research approaches, phenomenography was chosen as it provided a broad structured research approach that focused and developed theory from interviewees' understandings and interpretations. A phenomenographic approach offered the opportunity to define differences. However, in the research analysis similarities as well as differences were considered as defining teaching quality. This related to the use of a phenomenological approach to phenomenography, which is discussed later in this chapter (section 4.7).

Returning to the differences and similarities between phenomenology and phenomenography, it is useful to look at the work of Giorgi. The reasons for considering Giorgi's work, is that as a phenomenologist, he has researched educational phenomenology, and he has had close contact with Ference Marton throughout their careers.

Giorgi (1999) provided an in-depth analysis of the differences between phenomenology and phenomenography, in which he insisted that despite many shared values, there exists differences in understanding and in practice. He claimed that the common elements to the two approaches are:

1. Both value a strictly qualitative approach to the problem of learning.
2. Both insist that comprehending the perspective of the learner is critical.
3. Both acknowledge that there are varied ways in which humans can perceive or understand a situation.
4. Both approaches claim to be descriptive in orientation.
5. Both claim some influence from phenomenological philosophy. (Giorgi 1999 p86-87)

Giorgi claimed that the two methods differed in their goals, their approaches and their scope. He stated that the goals of phenomenography were to generalise and to form the findings into hierarchies from the differential experiences. He claimed that on the other hand, phenomenology grasped the essence or range of experiences in order to understand the variations better. According to Giorgi, the phenomenological approach is applicable to all disciplines and not just pedagogy, whereas phenomenography limits itself to educational settings. ('Although there seems to be no intrinsic reason for such a limitation, especially as phenomenography is an approach rather than a method or theory of learning': Giorgi, 1999, p. 89).

Finally, Giorgi says that in fact, phenomenography is closer to phenomenology in terms of origins and inspiration. Giorgi claims that many of the features of phenomenography have been taken from, or parallel, concepts within phenomenology, e.g. intentionality, bracketing, phenomenon, relevance structure, object of learning versus act of learning, external and internal horizons, appresentation etc. In personal communication, Giorgi (March 2003) made a scathing comment on the relationship between phenomenography and phenomenology:

In my view, phenomenography is an aborted phenomenology. That is, we both start from the perspective of the experiencing person but phenomenography stops when cert[a]in factual meanings are obtained but phenomenology continues to get the deeper structures that unifies [sic] the diverse meanings (March 2003).

It has to be acknowledged that Giorgi can be expected to have this stance as a phenomenologist. However, my research was not concerned only with differences, as potentially obtainable through phenomenography, but also with the structures that underpin those differences as defined through phenomenological approaches.

Drawing from all of Marton's research, I understood the aim of phenomenography as an attempt to try to describe an aspect of the world as it appeared to the individual and to clarify how people defined a specific part of the world. It is the participants' perceptions and resulting understandings rather than the experiences themselves that are the object of study (Barnard et al., 1999), and outcome is a description of the qualitative variation in the way a group of people experience phenomena (Trigwell, 2000). It is their experience and not the experience of the researcher or phenomenographer that is of interest. This requires the researcher to accept that they are part of the social world and need to 'bracket' their experience, as in phenomenology. Once again, there appeared to me to be an overlap between the two approaches. This overlap led me to consider the possibilities offered by combining the two approaches in a phenomenological phenomenography (section 4.7).

From the literature on phenomenology there seemed to be some divergence of thought between those that see phenomenology as a philosophical approach and others that see it as a method (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003). This is discussed further in section 4.7, where

phenomenological phenomenography is reviewed. Here is a brief overview in order to re-examine the differences between phenomenology and phenomenography:

Phenomenology aims to:

- describe individual accounts of perceptions and concepts that maintain individuality but illustrate how people perceive a given topic
- note similarities and differences in people's perception of reality or lifeworld and to study first hand experiences within the context of the participants' lives (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003)
- provide a structure of an individual's experience and variation and examine the beliefs that people hold.

Phenomenography aims to

- describe various specific things as they appear to us,
- pool individuals' meaning together to give a range of variation in which people perceive a topic,
- examine the qualitatively different ways in which people perceive and understand their reality (Marton, 1981).
- hierarchically arrange the different ways so that the reader can see how an individual can move from one level to another as they develop, where each meaning is successively more complex than the previous one, constituting the 'outcome space' (Marton and Säljö, 1984)
- make a decision about the specific level at which the participants' comments should be seen in relation to each other. Primarily based on reported behaviour and explanation of actions
- use processes of analysis which are iterative and involve constant comparison. This is similar to grounded theory, but the focus according Åkerlind and McKenzie

(2003a) is on constituting patterns of variation in ways of experiencing the particular phenomenon of interest.

4.6.1 Phenomenography and quality

Phenomenography has been used to research service quality. Schembri (2002; Schembri and Sandberg, 2002) suggested that a phenomenographic approach is a promising methodology for researchers to study the variation of how service quality is perceived and experienced. The points they are making is that conceptions are considered fundamental to actions and that a phenomenographic study of service quality aims to capture the widest variation of conceptions that consumers hold in terms of service quality. In Schembri's study of professional service quality, she stated that doctors striving to deliver quality of service must work towards recognising how the patient understands quality and shift their focus to accommodate that way of understanding. If that is correct, then teaching staff would also benefit from an understanding of different stakeholders' conceptions of quality teaching. It should be noted that the work of Schembri and Sandberg was roughly at the same time as I was conducting my research and therefore I could not have taken it into account prior to the data collection.

A number of papers, particularly those of Trigwell and colleagues (Trigwell, 2001; Trigwell and Prosser, 1997; Trigwell et al., 1998; 1999) state that some teachers keep more of a focus on their students in their planning and in their teaching activities and that these teachers are teaching students who describe a higher quality approach to their learning. Rovio-Johansson (1999) when looking at the different ways in which students experienced the content of lectures in management accounting, found that student experiences were grounded in the context of the lecturer's handling of the subject matter. Context and student-focused teaching appear to have an impact on conceptions of teaching quality, in that conceptions of quality are based on perceptions of how the teacher focuses on the

students' needs. Hence, it is important that those authorities that are collecting information on teaching quality have an understanding of the basis on which students evaluate high quality teaching.

If we accept that there is variation in the qualitatively different ways in which people learn and also on how they are taught, then the conclusion one might draw is that individuals exhibit variation in what they see as effective teaching and learning. The quality of the teaching is therefore affected by prior experience, including a variety of teaching and learning experiences. It could be that effective learning affects perceptions of high quality teaching, and that in fact teaching quality has more to do with student perceptions of having learned something. This in turn could be related to conceptions of learning (Säljö, 1979; Marton et al., 1993), where they conceive that they have learned something. During the interviews I asked participants about their learning experiences and when they felt the quality of the teaching was high.

To re-cap, this section looked at phenomenography and identified its applicability to researching and understanding how students learn. Phenomenography claimed that it allows the researcher to investigate the qualitatively different conceptions of teaching and learning. My research was into conceptions of quality in distance higher education and some of the participants' conceptions would be reflective on their previous experience. However, there is no reported research using phenomenography into the concepts of educational quality. Where phenomenography had been used in research into quality, and reported as valid, it was in areas such as work competence (Sandberg, 2000; 2001) and service quality (Schembri and Sandberg, 2002).

I was looking for a reflective approach to identifying conceptions of quality in DHE and at this point I considered as an alternative, an amalgamation of phenomenology and phenomenography, which had been used by other researchers. This approach was called phenomenological phenomenography and is discussed in the next section.

4.7 Phenomenological phenomenography

There has been some discussion in this chapter about phenomenography and its relationship to phenomenology. The current main protagonists of either approach seem to dispute that there is connection, although there are elements of phenomenology in phenomenography. Therefore, it would appear that amalgamation of both approaches is achievable. In fact, phenomenography has been combined with other research methodologies such as discourse analysis (Patrick, 2000).

Phenomenography, like phenomenology, has the intention to describe the world as people experience and explain it through an iterative process. However, in phenomenography there are different views on the major aspects of the approach. Barnard et al (1999) categorised phenomenography into three lines of inquiry. The first line of inquiry continued to concentrate on general aspects of learning. The second line of inquiry concerned the learning of concepts in domains such as economics, mathematics, or health care. The third line of inquiry he characterised as ‘pure’ phenomenographic interest, and is concerned with describing the way in which people internally conceive of various aspects of their world. I considered the third line of enquiry to be the intention of my research, because of its relevance to the description of perceptions and conceptions of the interviewees’ personal world.

Although there is not a large amount of published work on phenomenological phenomenography even on the phenomenography website <http://www.ped.gu.se/>, the website does provide some basic description, such as the phenomenological theorising of phenomenography and related studies. Some phenomenographers have striven to identify a phenomenological quality in their work (Hasselgren and Beach, 1997), and this phenomenological stance can be seen in the research work of Theman (1983), Bree (1999) and Zwiers (2000). The early experimental studies by Marton and his colleagues had phenomenological elements to them, before the term ‘phenomenography’ was coined. However, there is little reported use of phenomenological phenomenography outside doctoral dissertation. I suggest that this could occur for a number of reasons:

- the time it takes to use the approach results in few studies being published
- it could result in mixed approaches that are unclear to readers and editors
- it is not a valid approach.

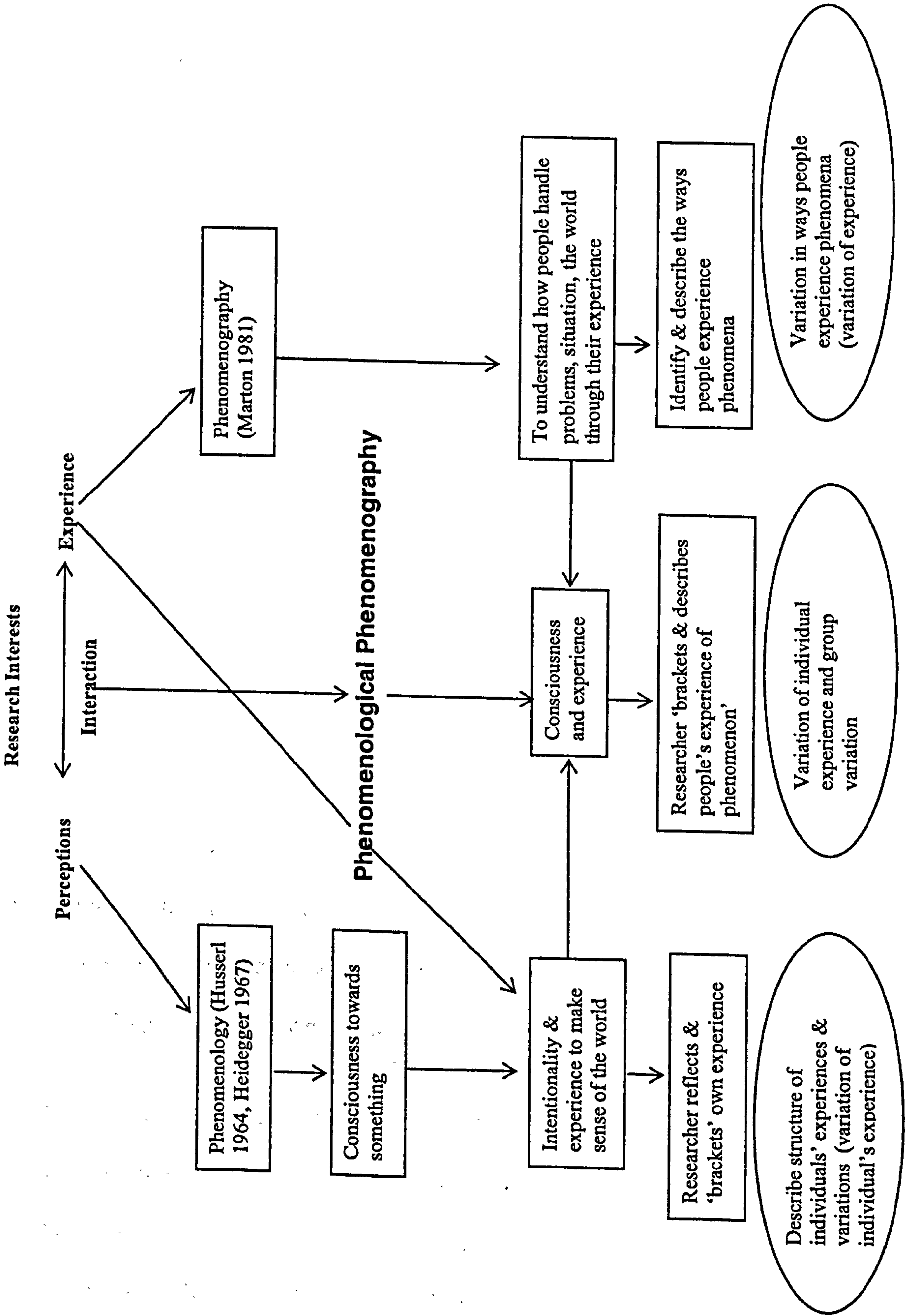
Bree (1999) defined phenomenological phenomenography as the product of combining two separate and distinct philosophical methods, each examining experience from a different viewpoint. He referred to phenomenological phenomenography as the description of experiences as ‘essential’ meanings (phenomenology) and how expertise is apprehended by the individual (phenomenography). Phenomenology is the perceptual orientation and phenomenography is the conceptual orientation, according to Bree (ibid). However, phenomenography has not been termed a philosophical method anywhere else in the literature. It has been termed an approach and more recently as a theory, and I propose to take the view that phenomenology provides a philosophical stance and applicable method to study stakeholders’ conceptions of quality, while phenomenography provides a respected tradition in the understanding of teaching and learning. Therefore,

phenomenological phenomenography, although not widely used in qualitative research fulfils my requirements on two fronts, first, as an approach to studying conceptions of quality, second, as a method.

In Figure 4.2 I have drawn together phenomenology and phenomenography to establish the roots of phenomenological phenomenography. The illustration provides links between phenomenography and phenomenology to explain my perceptions of phenomenological phenomenography. The result is the variation of individual experience or perceptions and group variation of experience or perceptions. Phenomenology is interested in human perception, while phenomenography is context dependent and relates to experience. Phenomenological phenomenography is based on the interaction between these two approaches and aims to find variation across both individuals and groups.

The diagram starts with the research interests of the two approaches. Phenomenology focuses on the individual's perceptions and consciousness towards something, whereas phenomenography focuses on how people understand to handle different problems through their experiences. I consider phenomenological phenomenography to be an interaction of these two approaches where intentionality and experience come together.

Fig 4.2 Roots of Phenomenological Phenomenography



The analysis of the gathered data in phenomenology relies on the researcher 'bracketing' their experiences. In phenomenography the analysis of the data is to identify and describe the ways people experience phenomena. The amalgamation of the two approaches involves researchers bracketing their own experience and describing other peoples' experiences. The outcome of the amalgamation of the two approaches is the description of the variation of the individual and the group experiences in relation to the development of concepts from perceptions.

Phenomenological phenomenography is an appropriate approach to the research into stakeholders' conceptions of DHE teaching quality, because it has the unique ability to consider the referential, experiential and conceptual aspects of both phenomenography and phenomenology. Both phenomenology and phenomenography are respected research traditions and approaches, and phenomenological phenomenography would exploit the key aspects of both to provide a more robust approach to researching stakeholders' conceptions. Phenomenography would offer an approach to understanding learning, and phenomenology would offer a more philosophical stance in understanding conceptions and perceptions.

The next chapter discusses the stakeholder analysis that influenced the selection of the research participants and the necessary link with the phenomenon under scrutiny. It also provides further discussion and description of the data collection process, together with an account of the pilot study.

4.8 Chapter conclusions

This chapter provided details of the methods that could be used to investigate distance higher education stakeholders' conceptions of quality and the rationale behind the decision to use phenomenological phenomenography. The decision was based on the following premises:

- Stakeholders' views of teaching quality were previously conveyed through quantitative studies which provided a broad understanding of the numbers of stakeholders holding particular views. There was less understanding of 'why' stakeholders held some specific views.
- A phenomenographic approach and a qualitative study of stakeholders' conceptions of distance higher education quality offered the possibility of exploring issues that may have been too complex or subtle to investigate through quantitative means.
- In the quality assurance of higher and distance education, teaching quality is one of the hardest perceptions to measure and requires further insight into stakeholders' conceptions of what they think is high quality education.

As phenomenology claims to be more perceptual, (focusing on sensory interpretations of events), whereas phenomenography claims to focus on conceptions, (formulating interpretations that are based on experience), then an approach that combines the two should be valuable in understanding stakeholders' concepts.

As a working definition, I consider phenomenological phenomenography to be an approach that considers the referential, experiential and conceptual understandings that humans have when discussing phenomena.

The next chapter discusses the data collection and describes the pilot study together with its contribution to the main study.

Chapter Five - Data collection methods and pilot study

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the research approaches of phenomenology, phenomenography and phenomenological phenomenography. The discussion indicated that phenomenology as a philosophy was applicable to research into stakeholders' conceptions of quality and that phenomenography provided a research tradition appropriate to teaching and learning. There had however been little previous research using phenomenological phenomenography and therefore little on its methodological underpinnings. As phenomenology and phenomenography use qualitative interviews as their primary source of data collection, this chapter describes and discusses the interviews conducted in a pilot study for the main research question: what are stakeholders' conceptions of quality in distance higher education?

This chapter addresses the issues of:

- who the potential stakeholder interviewees are and how an appropriate sample was selected based on the research discussed in Chapters 2 and 3;
- the role of the researcher;
- the pilot study and its analysis;
- how the interview schedule was developed in the light of the pilot study.

Quality is not an easily defined concept and although phenomenography has been used in service quality research (Schembri, 2002; Schembri and Sandberg, 2002), it has not been used for research into conceptions of educational quality. Phenomenology on the other hand relies on people's perceptions of phenomena, which could be termed appropriate for research into 'quality' as a phenomenon. However, I decided that phenomenological

phenomenography would be a method to elicit perceptions of quality (phenomenology) and conceptions or ways of experiencing quality (phenomenography). Interviews are recognised as a method to gather information about social worlds (Miller and Glassner, 1997), where ‘the primary issue is to generate data which give an authentic insight into people’s experiences’ (Silverman, 1993, p.91). The method is reliant on the perceptions of people who have experienced the phenomenon, and so, in the next section, the selection of participants is addressed.

5.2 Research interviewees

Qualitative researchers have used a number of terms to define their interactions between themselves and the interviewee. These terms have included ‘consultant’, ‘friend’, ‘respondent’, ‘actor’, ‘participant’, ‘interviewee’ and ‘source’. Some researchers such as Punch (1986) have used the term ‘collaborators’ to define those people who take part in the research. I felt that ‘collaborator’ gave a tone of collusion, which I felt uncomfortable about using. Throughout the thesis the term ‘interviewee’ or ‘participant’ have been used to identify the research participants, simply because they were the individuals who took part in the research interviews.

Interviewee sampling had to fit within the research design, the aims of the research and the rationale behind participants’ selection. There are a number of methods of sampling that could have been chosen and they are discussed in this section. The selection of interviewees in phenomenological or phenomenographical research aims to generate a wide range of variation in the set of descriptions produced for later analysis of the phenomena. However, due to the word restrictions of the thesis, only sampling methods relevant to the aims of the research are discussed and evaluated.

Gilchrist (1999) claimed that key research participants are individuals who could teach the researcher about the research topic, because of their specialist knowledge, status and willingness to share knowledge. This also implies that key participants are not randomly selected, but purposefully selected (Davey, 1999). 'Random selection' is a term primarily used for quantitative data collection, where all those in the population of interest have an equal and independent chance of being chosen (Schofield, 1996). However, the selection of key stakeholder interviewees represented a non-random, purposeful sampling strategy, where particular people, settings or events are deliberately selected for the information they can provide, which cannot be supplied by anyone else. In fact, Maxwell (1997) said that a small sample, selected for typicality and homogeneity, provided more confidence in the conclusions, because they adequately represented the views of members of the target population. Booth (2001a) suggested that data is collected from a sample of people, deliberately chosen to cover the population of interest in important dimensions. For her, the aim is to exhaust the variation in experience, and the collection of data is extended if the variation is felt to be under-represented, or cut short, if no new material is forthcoming. This allows the researcher an almost free hand in deciding whom to interview and how many to interview.

Whom to interview is therefore a primary consideration and, although stakeholder groups have been mentioned throughout the thesis so far, in this chapter I look more closely at the stakeholder sample and the stakeholder analysis. Stakeholders may present themselves as individuals (Anne), role occupants (researcher), as groupings (fencing club), occupational groupings (academia), as pressure groups (student union) and many more. Therefore, there is a need for systematic stakeholder analysis, and Burgoyne (1994) offered some suggestions to assist in this analysis.

- The first step is to identify those affected by the process and who should be given the opportunity to contribute to the discussion area.
- Stakeholders are identified as the actors, agents, interested parties, and interest groups associated with the topic under scrutiny.
- From the theoretical point of view, stakeholders are of interest because their needs, wants, desires, perceptions and conceptualizations are different. 'The source of these differences is a fundamental question.' (Burgoyne, 1994, p.190)

The practical process of doing stakeholder analysis, as is arguably the case with all research, involves skilled researcher craft judgements - whom to talk to, what to ask, what to probe, etc. Stakeholder analysis could be likened more to unfolding detective work than the implementation of a detailed pre-structured experimental design. As in detective work, collecting data from one interested party will tend to identify other stakeholders, who are then followed up.

As phenomenological phenomenography focuses on variation in the ways people experience phenomena, the sample was selected to maximise possible variation. Using Burgoyne's (1994) stakeholder analysis the people to be interviewed had to be those stakeholders who had experienced distance higher education in one way or another, as identified in Chapters 2 and 3. They also had to be the actors, agents, interested parties and the interest groups, and elaboration of the stakeholders chosen for the study is presented in the next section.

5.3 Sample

The sample characteristics are often missing in the literature on qualitative data gathering, as for example in Becker's discussion of phenomenology and interviewing (Becker, 1992)

and Glaser and Strauss's (1968) work in grounded theory. According to Polkinghorne (1989), the number of participants selected for phenomenological based studies varies considerably, from 3 to 325. This in turn leads to a dilemma: too many and I will never complete the analysis; too few and for some people I will have problems justifying my findings, but what is too few? Berry (1998) conducted her PhD study with only five participants, and some research studies are based on individual case studies, although not necessarily on a limited number of interviews. In phenomenology and phenomenography, there appears to be no ideal sample size. Turning to the work of phenomenographic researchers such as Ference Marton, I found that they do not indicate the optimum number of participants for interview. However, the number of interviews usually considered to generate a full range of variation appeared from previous studies to be between twenty and thirty-five. For example, Dahlberg (1992) conducted 29 separate interviews for her doctoral thesis, Theman (1983) conducted 35 interviews for his research into political power, and both Booth (2002) and Reid (2002) conducted interviews with 20 respondents.

Trigwell (1994) put forward the suggestion that sample size was limited by the range and the amount of data produced.

There are two limiting factors that favour 15-20 interviewees. At the lower end, about 15 are required to have a reasonable chance of getting the extremes of the range.

The limiting factor at the upper end is the volume of data produced. One of the fundamentals of phenomenographic analysis is that (at least initially) the interview transcripts should be treated as a whole, without regard to individual variation.

More than 20 transcripts from interviews as long as 60 minutes is a lot to wrap a brain around in one go. (p.59)

Other qualitative researchers have suggested that 10 long interviews with individuals should be conducted (Cresswell, 1998), whereas in market research this number would increase to 20-30 interviews (Smith and Fletcher, 2001). These interviews are usually conducted only once and then the data analysed. According to the National Centre for Social Research (NCSR), in their government policy research they generally use a range of sample sizes, but feel between 15 and 20 interviewees is an acceptable size. They say that there is insufficient diversity in less than that, and more than 50 has a point of diminishing return. Kvale (1996) agrees that the number of interviews should be in the range from 5 to 25 with an optimum number of 15. 'This number may be due to a combination of time and resources available for the investigation and of the law of diminishing returns' (p102).

There appears to be a common consensus that 20 – 30 interviews is an acceptable number for valid qualitative research. I did increase the number to 33 for the main study to ensure I had adequate representation of the stakeholder groups. There were in total nine stakeholder groups and I felt that fewer than 15 interviews would not provide the breadth of the groups and would be unlikely to uncover sufficient variability and depth.

Following Burgoyne's (1994) stakeholder analysis which included the actors, agents, interested parties and interest groups associated with the topic, I included students, alumni and tutorial staff as the actors, as they were taking part in the interaction of teaching and learning. The agents were the course designers and staff tutors, as they mediated between the university and the teaching staff and students. The interested parties were the policy developers, the employers and policy influencers, as they were interested in the outcomes of the teaching and learning interaction, and finally, the interest groups included the student union, who had a political and referential interest in the quality of distance higher education. It was felt that each group of stakeholders had a different type of decision to

make in DHE, and each group may consider different aspects to have different levels of relevance and importance to them (Judd et al., 1991).

5.4 The interpretative role of the researcher

A number of qualitative researchers agree that the researcher is an instrument of data collection, who gathers words or pictures, analyses them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants and describes a process that is expressive and persuasive in language (Cresswell, 1998). Cresswell suggested that qualitative researchers use the pronoun 'I' to bring the writer into the study and that the qualitative researcher's role is as an 'active learner' who tells the story from the participants' point of view rather than as an 'expert'. Cotterill & Letherby (1994) argued that social scientists needed to be clear about their own values and ideals and how these will affect their work, and to avoid total subjectivity. One criticism of phenomenographic research is the belief that the definition of the situation by the most influential party, i.e. the interviewer, stands unchallenged and unproblematic (Säljö, 1996). This view, where the researcher has the most influence over the definitions, meant that I could be providing less of the participants' perceptions and more of my own perceptions. Therefore, I adopted a more phenomenological approach and attempted to 'bracket' my perceptions, as the previous phenomenological phenomenographic research was not clear on its precise methods.

Interpretative data analysis requires just that, interpretation and I am mindful of the criticisms that the researcher interprets qualitative data as personal constructs. However, I would argue that we all interpret what other people are saying and place emphasis on specific topics. The argument is that initially all our understanding comes from sensory experience which must be described, explained and interpreted by individuals (Husserl, 1964/1907). Therefore, I adopted an interpretative rather than structural analysis (Tesch,

1990) to focus on the content of the transcripts and, as far as possible, I attempted to stand outside the data and to 'bracket' my pre-suppositions. This was difficult due to my closeness to distance higher education as an employee for nearly ten years within the sector.

However, Cotterill & Letherby (1994) have argued that drawing on your own experience helps in understanding the experiences of others. From my understanding of phenomenology one is expected to 'bracket' one's own experiences and assumptions, and not draw on those experiences (Husserl, 1964/1907) (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962) (Giorgi, 1997). This leaves a dilemma where on the one hand interpreting the data collected is seen as a valuable part of the researcher's role and on the other the researcher is expected to attempt to stand apart from the data.

According to Borman (1986) the problems can be overcome when:

the researcher embraces and makes explicit the subjective aspects of interaction with study participants building it into the research design. This produces a search for deeper understandings of subject experiences and more authentic portrayals.

(p.44)

As stated earlier, there needed to be some detachment and time to reflect on findings, and qualitative researchers need to make clear their research questions, data collection and sources of investigation, so that their research is not only replicable, but also available for peer scrutiny. In this thesis, I have applied personal comments only to clarify my viewpoints and approaches and not to voice the views of the interview participants. The first person is used to indicate where personal influence has taken place or where personal views are used to aid clarification. It is the researcher's goal to re-create experience in

terms of its constituent elements and to contextualise the essential themes and structures discovered during bracketing and to locate them in the social world (Denzin, 2002).

5.5 The interview

Qualitative interviews are intended to encourage informants to talk about themselves and can be seen as guided conversations. In this situation, the interviewee is not merely a passive vehicle who, with the correct probing, will reveal all of the hidden meanings under scrutiny. It is not a police interrogation or a public display of how things are viewed by one person. In social science interviews, the respondent actively constructs and assembles answers, and neither long narratives nor one-word replies leap from the informant unsolicited (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). The interviewer does, however, have to be an attentive listener and to draw further information from the respondents. To build on my qualitative interview experience and update my skills, I attended a course on *In-depth Interviewing: The design, conduct and analysis of in-depth interviews* run by the Qualitative Research Unit of the National Centre for Social Research in November 1999 prior to embarking on the research interviews. This provided an opportunity to reflect on my previous work and to re-affirm my interviewing skills. I also used some of their 'framework' techniques as data management tools (see Ritchie and Spencer, 2002).

Interviews are typically classified into three broad typologies: structured, unstructured and semi-structured. Structured interviews follow a strict format and in some cases are more akin to survey design where each person answers questions in a set pattern. This is one way of minimising interviewer-related effects with standardized wording of interview questions (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1996). Unstructured interviews are almost the complete opposite, in that there are no pre-formed questions, only a topic for discussion, and the informant can take direction of the interview. The potential danger with unstructured

interviews is that the freedom to talk could lead to long, detailed and rambling stories, which although valid in some types of research and situations, may have no relevance to the topic under scrutiny for my research.

Semi-structured interviews have a place somewhere in-between the other two, in that an interview guide or topic guide are produced with some specific questions, but these are not always asked in the same order with each informant. This type of interview also allows for extra follow-up questions during the interview, as there is not a pre-defined structure. Using a semi-structured interview requires some adherence to the same topics, and to ensure that this occurs, an interview guide listing the topics to be covered is designed (King, 1994). King suggested three sources for the topics: research literature; interviewer's own personal knowledge and experience of the area; and the informal preliminary work with other people in the research area. In my research, I included all three areas through a literature review, knowledge of distance education as an employee of a large single-mode institution, and the pilot study.

Marton (1988b) suggested that phenomenographic interviews should be conducted with questions that are open and allow the individual to choose the direction of the interview, and therefore may take different paths in each interview. However, by defining the topic areas the open questions would also cover the relevant issues to the research question. Both the pilot study and main research study interviews included common topics for discussion, but the order and respondents' chosen emphasis differed.

In semi-structured interviews, the researcher does similar things in each interview, but each interview is a unique creative event (Becker, 1992). The researcher follows initial open-ended questions with requests to elaborate on events, feelings, memories, meanings and

thoughts. The intention is to aid interviewees' reflection on the phenomenon and to reduce the concern that researchers would introduce his/her ideas to the interviews (Bowden, 1994). In addition, the researcher must avoid using leading questions, prejudicial language, 'double-barrelled' questions (two questions in one), or assumptive questions (Arksey and Knight, 1999). One advantage that Carey (1998) sees in using semi-structured interviews is the flexibility it allows interviewers to explore complex issues without finite or predetermined response categories. The responses can then be standardised to a sufficient degree to allow for comparability of findings. However, there is the challenge of organisation and management of data before analysis. Even semi-structured interviews have to have some guidance and this is where the interview/topic guide ensures that the important issues are always covered in every interview (Wilson, 1996).

The first step in interviewing recommended by many researchers (Polkinghorne, 1989; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; 1997) is to engage in self-reflection and to conduct a pilot study to add to the self-reflection. The integration of these two steps should generate a list of research questions designed to tap the informants' viewpoints. What I wanted was an understanding of how these views arose and the theories that people used to underpin their views, so before conducting the main study a pilot study was completed. The pilot study provided the opportunity for reflection on the interview questions and for further questions and topics for discussion to be generated. In the next section, the pilot study is discussed, together with how it 'helped' in the development of the final interview schedule.

5.6 The pilot study

The pilot study consisted of eight interviews conducted between June and July 2000. For a pilot study to work effectively it must be representative of the variety of individuals who will take part in the main study (Wilson, 1996). The pilot study (see Appendix A) reported here involved: three single-mode distance education academics, one distance education

tutor, one student association representative, two students (one single-mode and one dual-mode), and one policy developer. This covered the range of my groupings and allowed me to develop my main study interview topic guide (see Appendix B), to polish my interview techniques, and ensure mastery of the tape-recording equipment. All interviewees were asked for their permission to record the interviews and were assured that any responses they made would be kept anonymous. To secure anonymity the names of the interviewees have not been included. Representativeness is difficult to guarantee with small samples; however this was as full a range of representatives of the stakeholders for the main study as possible (Wilson, 1996). The interviews were conducted at a location of their choice, so that each interviewee felt comfortable and relaxed. All of the interviewees were known personally to me, and this could be a limitation to the pilot study, but as they were representative of each of the groups it was felt to have little or no impact on the aims of the pilot study.

5.6.1 Phenomenology and phenomenography as methods of analysis for the pilot study interviews

The analysis of qualitative data is usually through transcription of the original interviews plus the inclusion of field notes. Full transcripts allow the researcher to read all the transcriptions and then divide into units those that seem to express a self contained meaning. Transcription however, has its own problems besides the length of time it takes to complete. There is the difficulty of making adequate and correct transcripts of recorded interviews. Features of speech, such as rapid changes in pitch, stress, volume and rate are almost impossible to represent adequately, whilst at the same time retaining the legibility of the text (Mishler, 1986).

The analysis of qualitative data frequently results in categorisation of the interviews, and greater emphasis is put on these categorisations by phenomenography. Marton saw the initial finding of the categories of descriptions as a form of discovery, and discoveries do not have to be replicable (Marton, 1988b), thereby relieving one concern about qualitative research, which is its replicability. A suggestion made by Marshall and Rossman (1989) on replicability is that all collected data should be in a well-designed retrievable form, making the findings available if challenged, or if another researcher wants to re-analyse the data. To attempt to achieve this level of replicability I used audiotapes and full transcriptions, although without all of the features of speech. The data is available for further scrutiny if necessary.

Most qualitative data analysis involves data reduction and translating the transcripts into a form on which further analysis can be carried out. Patton (1990) suggests that the first step is to decide whether the analysis is going to be within-case or cross-case, where each case is one interview. If it is the former then the data need to be formed into case studies (phenomenology uses this format). If it is the latter then Patton suggests that responses from different individuals to the same questions need to be grouped together (as in phenomenography). Cross-case analysis forms not just generalizations, but expresses briefly and accurately whilst encompassing all the individual cases into a general condensation (Fischer, 2002).

The pilot study provided an opportunity to test out phenomenographic and phenomenological data analysis and the opportunity to review the use of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). In section 5.7, I describe how I used the pilot study to test the different analyses prior to the main study to ensure that I used appropriate analysis for the main study.

5.6.2 Phenomenographical analysis

Very few published studies using phenomenographical research methods describe the analysis in detail (see Dall’Alba, 1994; Prosser, 1994). Ashworth and Lucas (1998) suggest that reported phenomenographic research should be more explicit about the nature of the process, which would in fact help novice phenomenographers, like myself. In a later article, Ashworth and Lucas (2000) suggested that more attention should be paid to the process of empathy and the setting aside of presuppositions (bracketing). In the later article, they proposed a series of nine guidelines for conducting phenomenographic research:

1. The researcher should tentatively identify the broad objective of the research study, the phenomenon under investigation, recognising that this area may be quite different for the research participant.
2. The selection of participants should avoid presuppositions about the nature of the phenomenon or the nature of conceptions held by particular ‘types’ of individual.
3. The most appropriate means of obtaining an account should be identified, allowing maximum freedom for the research participant to describe their experience.
4. In obtaining an experiential account the participant should be given the maximum opportunity to reflect.
5. The researcher’s interviewing skills should be subject to an ongoing review and changes made to interview practice if necessary.
6. The transcription of the interview should be aimed at accurately reflecting the emotions and emphases of the participant.
7. The analysis should continue to be aware of the importation of presuppositions, and be carried out with the maximum exercise of empathic understanding.
8. Analysis should avoid premature closure for the sake of producing logically and hierarchically related categories of description.

9. The process of analysis should be sufficiently clearly described to allow the reader to evaluate the attempt to achieve bracketing and empathy. (p. 300)

They say that it is for the researcher to be explicit about the choices made in the research and to demonstrate within that framework how bracketing and empathy have been achieved.

In phenomenography, the aim is to develop a hierarchy of the variation in the ways a phenomenon is experienced. It is the key aspects of the variation, which result in an outcome space, which is a partial description of the experiences of the phenomenon, rather than a full description as might be expected using a phenomenological approach (Trigwell, 2000). This is because, in phenomenography, the focus is on the differences, or aspects, or ways of experiencing a phenomenon, and those aspects that are common across the whole sample are not incorporated. The responses to the open-ended questions are sorted into categories, but where it differs from content analysis is that the categories are not devised in advance.

As the categories of description are the product of the research, it is the researcher's choice to limit the number of categories of description. However, it is not clear what decisions are made in terms of 'closing down' the analysis (Ashworth and Lucas, 1998) and what is being omitted. In fact to some extent the number of categories may depend on the view of the researcher towards the data. Walsh (1994, 2000) suggests that data is analysed either through a process of construction or as a process of discovery. The researcher can either construct categories or discover them. Construction is where the raw data represents the interviewer's relationship to the phenomenon and the researcher then draws on his or her perspective to describe the relationship the interviewee has to the phenomenon. One

category may encapsulate lower-level categories to enable a tidy construction, which is useful for purposes such as education (Walsh, 2000). Walsh says that the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon under study influences the construction of the categories. There are some dangers to this approach, which she acknowledges, such as adding or adjusting categories where this is not supported by the data; imposing a logical framework on the data where this is not justified; and analysing the data from the researcher's or content expert's framework, so that the interpretation of the data is skewed towards an accepted or expert view of the phenomenon (p.23).

On the other hand, Walsh (2000) refers to the 'discovery' of categories from the data to provide a holistic account of the phenomenon. The process of discovery emphasises the similarities in the data (p.25) and the approach looks at the data to discover what is there and attempts to represent the data faithfully in the categories. No attempt is made to 'fit' the data into pre-determined categories: 'the categories are based on the most distinctive features that differentiate one conception from another and are presented in the form of a hierarchy, reflecting increasing levels of understanding' (Bowden, 2000a p.50). The influence of the researcher is therefore an integral part of the analysis as well as interpretation of the data, whereas in phenomenology the researcher attempts to stand apart and 'bracket' their experiences.

Booth (2001b) claims that the analysis of phenomenographic data produces categorisations of the distinct orientations that research participants have and is not the categorisations of the individuals themselves. The results from the data are 'pooled' at an early stage, which temporarily loses the individual context. Booth and Ingerman (2002) provide some indication on the analysis of their research which includes:

- tape-recorded interviews that are fully transcribed and carefully edited;

- the interviews then form a 'pool of meaning' in which the variation in ways of experiencing the phenomena of interest are to be seen;
- by reading the interviews repeatedly, first as expressions of individual participants and then as a series of extracts related to specific issues;
- categories are formed and reformed;
- extracts from interviews are sought to support and give substance to the categories;
- logical and empirical links between categories are explored;
- the development of a hierarchy of empirical links between categories which capture the essence of the whole experience and reveal the essential variational structure of the experience. (p495)

Other phenomenographic researchers have included similar stages. Hyrkäs (2003)

suggested 6 stages including:

1. Reading the entire material;
2. Selection of comments;
3. Comparison of comments;
4. Formation of pools of meanings by grouping comments;
5. Comparison of similarities and differences of the meaning pools;
6. Generation of descriptions of categories and their interrelationships.

Reading and re-reading interview transcripts appears to be an integral part of

phenomenographic data analysis, and, from these readings, respondents are grouped

according to their conceptions and the focus is on the meaning of statements in relation to

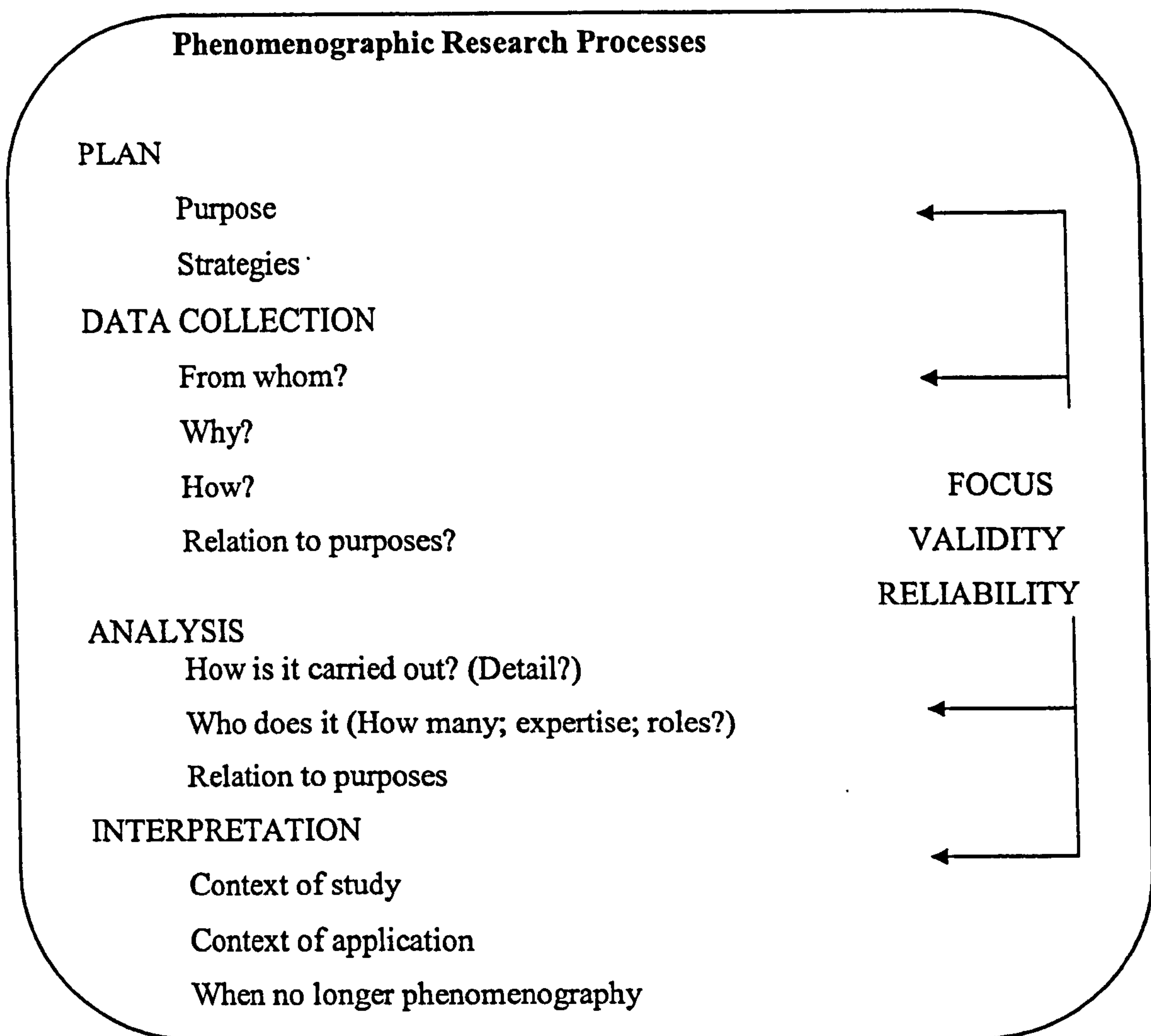
the context of the other statements (Schembri and Sandberg, 2002a). Schembri and

Sandberg state that the focus is on describing the person and their world as one relation, in

a holistic and integrated manner. This is similar to phenomenology and in his earlier work Sandberg (2000, 2001) refers to phenomenological reduction as a strategy for achieving interpretative awareness of the research object. In fact, Marton also refers to phenomenology in his work and the use of 'bracketing' to refer to standing back from the data and not imposing one's own view to the data (Marton, 1994b). The boundaries separating individuals are abandoned and interest should focus on the 'pool of meanings'. An activity that Marton (1986) acknowledged as tedious, time-consuming, labour intensive and interactive.

Marton (1986) selects quotes to make up the data pool, whereas Bowden (2000b) prefers to work with the whole transcript to keep the utterances within the context. Bowden has a pragmatic approach to phenomenography in that he sees it as enabling him to inform practice. To do this it needs a coherent method, which he illustrated in a diagram which is reproduced in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 Research Processes (Bowden, 2000b p.7)



Bowden suggests that the *planning stage* requires the researcher to keep in mind the purpose and strategy of the project. The *data collection* stage needs the researcher to collect data from the most appropriate resources for the study, and the *analysis* stage refers to how the analysis is to be conducted. Finally, at the *interpretation* stage the researcher reviews the data within its context and not abstracted from the situation.

The responses are sorted into categories, which are not created in advance of the interviews, i.e. categories emerge from the data, they are not defined before starting the interviews (Marton, 1988a), they are discovered (Walsh 2000). As Richardson (1999) says

this appears to be very similar to the basis of grounded theory, where theory emerges from the data. To some extent, this is what Bowden (2000b) is actively achieving in his use of discovery categories and what Åkerlind and McKenzie (2003a) referred to in their workshop on phenomenography. Following this first phase of categories emerging from the data, the utterances are brought into categories based on their similarities and the categories are differentiated from one another in terms of their differences. Then, quotes are sorted into groups, borderline cases are examined and the criteria attributes for each group are made explicit by the researcher. Core meanings are defined, as are borderline cases, and each category is illustrated by quotes from the data.

Phenomenography is concerned with the range of conceptions, rather than an individual's conceptions and perceptions. These are characterised in terms of categories of description which form hierarchies in relation to given criteria (Trigwell, 2000). In fact, one of the notable features of phenomenography is that five or six categories usually emerge, for example: five conceptions of learning (Säljö, 1979); six conceptions of matter (Renström et al., 1990) six conceptions of learning (Marton et al., 1993); six conceptions of statistics (Reid and Petocz, 2002); six categories of physics descriptions (Booth and Ingeman, 2002); and five conceptions of academic freedom (Åkerlind and Kayrooz, 2003b). Sandberg (2000) reported the lowest number of categories, when he identified three conceptions of engine optimization from interviews with Volvo engineers.

5.6.3 Phenomenological analysis

As presented in Chapter 4 on the research approach, it is the intention of phenomenology to research participants' perceived reality, and a researcher develops a process of meaning discrimination to form meaning units (Giorgi, 1997). Giorgi elaborates this further by saying that the relevant meaning units are formed by a slower re-reading of the description, and each time that the researcher experiences a transition in meaning in the description, he

or she marks the place with a slash (/) and continues to read until the next meaning unit is discriminated. These descriptions are ‘constituted by the attitude and activity of the researcher’ (p.16). The aim is not to prove what the researcher originally posited, but the approach is ‘discovery-oriented’ and, in order to discover meanings in the data, one needs to allow unexpected meanings to emerge. Again, this is similar to the basis of grounded theory, where theory emerges from the data.

Phenomenology aims to give an understanding of consciousness, and the essence of consciousness is intentionality (Giorgi, 1998b) since phenomenology is interested in meaning, the basis of the division into parts is meaning discrimination (Giorgi, 1989, 1997, Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003). Giorgi’s analysis consists of:

- reading the data,
- dividing the data into parts (meaning discrimination),
- the organization and expression of raw data into the appropriate disciplinary language,
- synthesis of data into structures.

Other writers also offer guidelines on phenomenological analysis (Hycner, 1985) and Koivisto (2002). Hycner referred to fifteen points in his paper on phenomenological data analysis:

1. Transcription;
2. Bracketing and reduction;
3. Listening to the interview;
4. Delineating units of general meaning;
5. Delineating units of meaning relevant to the research;
6. Training independent judges;

7. Eliminating redundancies;
8. Clustering units of relevant meaning;
9. Determining themes from clusters;
10. Writing a summary;
11. Return to the participant;
12. Modify;
13. Identify general and unique themes;
14. Contextualization of themes;
15. and finally, Composite summary.

Nearly all of Hycner's fifteen points are relevant to phenomenography and Table 5.1 is my comparison of phenomenology and phenomenography approaches.

Koivisto (2002) described the analysis of data from a phenomenological perspective as:

1. reading the whole statement to understand the informant's language, discrimination of meaning units,
2. transforming the everyday expressions into discipline specific language
3. a synthesis of transformed meaning units into a statement of the structure.

Hycner and Koivisto's descriptions of analysis have many similarities to that of Giorgi (1989; 1997; 2003). Once again, researchers have broken down one unit into smaller units that can be moved to form and re-form differing clusters of meaning. The use of slashes (/) in demarcating a meaning unit assists the researcher in reading the transcript in a disciplined way that ensures thoroughness and accountability disallowing a rush to conceptual closure (Fischer and Wertz, 2002). Early conceptual closure was a concern that Ashworth and Lucas (1998) raised about phenomenography and one that, I assume will be alleviated in phenomenological analysis of the data.

In Table 5.1 my aim is to draw comparisons between phenomenography and phenomenology to ascertain whether there is any major difference in the analysis of data. The reason for the comparison is to look at both approaches and where there are similarities and differences. The approach for the main study would be phenomenological phenomenography and as there is no reported data analysis appropriate to that approach it would be useful to look at the both phenomenology and phenomenography.

	<i>Phenomenography</i>	<i>Phenomenology</i>
Data collection	Interview data collection	Interview data collection
Transcription	Transcription of interviews	Transcription of interviews
Units of initial analysis	Categorisation of similarities / differences	Meaning discrimination
Second level analysis	Development of outcome space	Development of meaning units
Disciplinary changes		Conversion to disciplinary language
Initial outcomes	Formation of hierarchy	Understanding of consciousness
Final outcomes	Conceptions of phenomenon	Intentionality of consciousness

Table 5.1 Comparison of Analysis

Table 5.1 illustrates that there are a number of similarities including the transcription of the data, categorisation/discrimination and the development of units that convey meaning.

Phenomenology relies more heavily on the understanding of consciousness and less on hierarchies of variation.

5.6.4 Data Analysis and Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS)

During my deliberations on phenomenography and phenomenology as research methodologies, I also considered using computer packages for data analysis. The pilot study had alerted me to the amount of data involved in qualitative interviewing, and to handle the data I considered the use of a computer package. Reviewing the literature on qualitative data analysis I found that researchers differed considerably on their opinions of computer packages (Sale et al., 2002, Boeije, 2002) and on the relative merits of software (Fielding and Lee, 1998). To gain an insight and further understanding of qualitative data analysis I joined an academic discussion group Qual-Software@JISCMAIL.ac.uk which has an associated website providing background information <http://caqdas.soc.surrey.ac.uk>. These provided a source of valuable understanding into how Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) was currently being used.

There initially appeared to be software packages that supported the principles of phenomenography or phenomenology. According to Booth (1993) a specific software package called First Order Perspective (FOP) was developed for phenomenographic research which focused on first-order perspectives (from the individual's own perceptions). The second-order perspectives were where the researcher used their expertise through their own interpretation of the data. FOP used HyperCard on a Macintosh computer, and comprised three stacks called *Chunks Stack*, *Quotes Stack* and the *Theme Notes Stack*. It was similar to keeping notes of transcriptions and ideas on index cards, and Booth (1993) said that it was easy to learn and use. Therefore, before progressing any further on the method for data analysis I contacted Shirley Booth. Her response highlighted the difficulties she had had with the package and further supported my decision to conduct the analysis by hand:

Well, it was successful when it was working, in that it supported a good deal of the work I and others did. But it was unstable inasmuch as Macintosh was unstable - new operating systems and new versions of HyperCard needed frequent revisions of the program. And so it fell into disuse. (personal communication 8th January 2003)

Otherwise, there was nothing that appeared to help in analysing either phenomenography or phenomenology. I attempted to analyse the data using a qualitative data package (N5 based on NVIVO), but found it cumbersome and I felt separated from the data. With no suitable computer assisted data analysis program, I returned to my original idea of reading and re-reading the data and then 'hand' sorting the data. This was consistent with the work of phenomenographic researchers such as Marton, Prosser and Trigwell who used this technique rather than CAQDAS.

5.7 Contribution of the pilot study

Having decided not to use a computer package I printed out all the pilot study transcripts. First, I analysed the data using phenomenological methods. This involved reading the transcripts in full for a number of times, to get a 'feel' for the data and an overall sense of each transcript. Then I read each transcript to identify transitions of meaning. From this developed the meaning unit or perception, which could be attributable to the concept of quality. The second part of the pilot study analysis involved using phenomenographic analysis, although this time the transcripts were not kept as individual units, but were pooled together to identify different concepts. From this a hierarchy was formed to explain the means by which an individual can move from one level to another.

Although the full analysis of the pilot study is not presented here, due to word limitation, it is useful to consider worked examples from three of the stakeholder groups, using the same pieces of text in phenomenological and phenomenographical analysis. The first extract is from one of the academics:

Mmm quality and teaching./ I mean as an academic I think quality is important, but that there are so many things about quality./ I mean is it defined by teaching quality or what?/ I think quality has to do with people and how much you are willing to put in./ I know of one tutor who doesn't do much but students are happy. They don't know what to expect. They don't know what is teaching quality.

In this extract, as outlined by phenomenology, slashes (/) were placed in the text where meaning changed (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003).

- The first concept I defined in this extract was quality as 'multifaceted': / I mean as an academic I think quality is important, but that there are so many things about quality./
- The second was more of a query about 'who or what defines' quality: /I mean is it defined by teaching quality or what?/
- The third concept related to 'reliant on other people': / I think quality has to do with people and how much you are willing to put in./

The final concept is related to 'expert knowledge': ./ I know of one tutor who doesn't do much but students are happy. They don't know what to expect. They don't know what is teaching quality./

The second extract is taken from a tutor's interview:

There is customer expectation/ and if you are paying for the course and see yourself as a customer, then there doesn't seem to be much institutional expectation./ [What do you mean?] That students, if they want information then they have more expectations of the course./ You expect to pay a premium for something of higher quality./

- Here I have taken the first concept to be related to 'expectations': /There is customer expectation/
- The second related to 'perception of self as customer': /and if you are paying for the course and see yourself as a customer, then there doesn't seem to be much institutional expectation./
- There is also a 'need' related to expectations: /That students, if they want information then they have more expectations of the course./
- Finally, that quality is related to 'commercial value': You expect to pay a premium for something of higher quality./

The third extract is from a single-mode student interview:

On the quality thing,/ and the general side of students,/ I attempted to take a course with the OU when I started about two years ago, /and I was a drop out. I dropped out. [Why?] It was a course on computer programmes./ And I have been writing in seven different computer languages for fifteen to twenty years./ And I thought 'well, I will take a course on this', /and no it was written for 16 and 18 year olds/ within the first two lessons they had frogs going across the screen and playing

games./ And it just wouldn't work for me,/ I stuck with it for several months, but it just wouldn't work,/ I couldn't apply the logic in the way the OU wanted me to study.

- In this extract I interpreted the first concept 'failure', failure to complete the course and failure by the university to meet expectations: /I attempted to take a course with the OU when I started about two years ago, /and I was a drop out. I dropped out.
- The second concept was 'experience', the student's self perception was as experienced, but that the course was too low level for their needs: /and no it was written for 16 and 18 year olds/ within the first two lessons they had frogs going across the screen and playing games./

Using these three extracts as illustration the meanings were then pooled together so that phenomenographic analysis was conducted, where it is the differences in understanding that are identified. The transcripts were divided into selected quotes as in Marton's explanation (1986) of phenomenographical analysis and then sorted into groups.

- One such grouping from the extracts was related to teaching and quality:
 - 'Mmm quality and teaching' (academic);
 - 'I mean is it defined by teaching quality or what?' (academic);
 - 'On the quality thing and the general side of students' (student).
- Quality was also personal:
 - 'I think quality has to do with people and how much you are willing to put in.'
 - (academic)
 - 'You expect to pay a premium for something of higher quality.' (tutor)

From all of the interviews in the pilot study there appeared to be a relationship for the interviewees between their perception of quality and quality as personal, multi-faceted, relying on expert knowledge and financial cost. The range could be formed into a hierarchy from personal, to expert knowledge, to cost, to multifaceted, but by no means was this definitive, as they could easily be rearranged. However, I felt there was a move by the interviewees from a personal interpretation to a multiple definition of quality, which could be an 'outcome space'.

When I had conducted all of the analysis from the different interviewees, I came to a number of conclusions about using phenomenology and phenomenography as analytic tools. As can be seen from the examples, similar perceptions appeared to emerge from the data; what is different is the development of a hierarchy and the interpretation of the 'outcome space'. The similarities between the two forms of analysis was striking, particularly the division of the transcripts into meaning units or quotes. However, phenomenology kept each of the interviews in context, so that extracts were not isolated; as a result I was able to see how a person had developed their point of view within each interview transcript. I felt that phenomenology and phenomenography were in some ways related, and if that is true, then an approach such as phenomenological phenomenography could possibly be useful in understanding concepts and was a suitable definition for the type of analysis I was to undertake, which had a phenomenological basis.

5.8 Findings from the pilot study

This section reviews the analysis and contribution of the 8 interviews which formed the pilot study, and the development of the main study interview schedule.

The initial analysis was within-case (phenomenology) and then later cross-case (phenomenography) and then the two methods compared. Throughout the analysis, it was borne in mind that it was important to move backwards and forwards between the original transcripts and tapes to ensure that the data were not considered outside the original context, which is easy to do over a long period of immersion in the data.

In phenomenography there usually emerges an ordered set of a small number of categories. My pilot study analysis identified a small number of categories including personal views of quality, measurements of quality, academic understanding and the idea that quality in DHE was related to teaching quality. From this phenomenographic analysis I could not achieve an in-depth understanding of how the interviewees' concepts could be formed into a hierarchy. I felt that the phenomenographic approach provided a method to develop hierarchies, but it did not signify that a hierarchy existed. The approach required me to force hierarchies and relationships on the data and that the hierarchy existed only because as the researcher I had defined one. I also agreed with Ashworth and Lucas (2000), that the analysis could easily develop early closure for the sake of producing related categories of description, whereas phenomenological analysis requires synthesis of the data and relies less heavily on structures.

Phenomenology allowed me to read the transcripts as a whole and to see the meaning units in context. I could also take each of the interviews and identify what each stakeholder perceived as the main concepts of quality in DHE. These concepts could then be considered across the stakeholder groups and consideration given to the level of importance that each concept had within each group and in fact, if the concept did not appear in any one group. The study was concerned with stakeholders' concepts and it would be useful to the development of a model of 'quality' to know the variation that each

stakeholder group valued as important. Levels of importance and emphasis for each concept might indicate where some stakeholders have a greater understanding of quality assurance guidelines, and this is reflected in their concepts. However, these concepts may not be the dominant ones for other stakeholder groups.

In phenomenography the 'pooled meanings' would not enable me to take into account the individual stakeholder group's perspective. Therefore, I decided to adopt a phenomenological approach to the analysis, but to continue to search for whether or not there were connections between respondents which could form groupings and categories, as in phenomenography.

One explanation of why it is easier to achieve a small number of categories in phenomenography is that when you ask about concepts the descriptions tend to be brief and it is simpler to work with descriptions of concepts than descriptions of experiences (Giorgi, 1986). The brevity results in fewer transformed meaning units. Giorgi demonstrated how this occurred when he used data that had been collected through a phenomenographic study of Open University students (Taylor et al., 1981). From the Open University study, Giorgi used phenomenology to identify 37 different conceptions of learning. He was able to reduce these 37 to five when he conducted a phenomenographic analysis of the same data. The smaller number would have arisen, according to Giorgi, because phenomenography asks about concepts rather than experiences.

Again, there appeared to be little separating the two approaches to data analysis or the methodological basis where it did differ is in the focus of the interview. The focus could be on concepts (phenomenography) or experiences (phenomenology). Again I returned to the use of phenomenological phenomenography as an approach as potentially it could provide

insight into experiences and concepts. However, I was concerned that there was no clear framework for analysing phenomenological phenomenography in any of the reported research conducted using this methodology. This meant that I adopted a similar procedure to that recommended by many phenomenological researchers and particularly Giorgi (Giorgi, 1989; 1997; Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003):

1. Read the whole description until there is a global sense of the description.
2. Meaning units are identified in the text and every time there is a transition of meaning a slash is put in the text. Meaning units can be varied in length and remain individualistic.
3. The development of a transformed meaning unit, which is where the participant's language is transformed into discipline specific language, such as psychology.

I also analysed the frequency of occurrence of each perception and conception in a similar way to Garcia, Evans and Reshaw (2004):

In other words, the various themes are presented as equally important regardless of their frequency of occurrence, because the representativeness of the sample to the general population is unknown. However, she [Evans] does draw readers' attention to particular themes if they are mentioned by all, or almost all, respondents who commented, or by only one or two, because such striking difference in frequency may be important ... (p.123)

The pilot study and discussions with the participants after the interviews illustrated that some of my initial questions needed unpacking. On occasion they were obscure and needed clarification to enable the participant to reflect on their own experience. For

example, there was one question that asked participants about what they perceived as models of quality. This was too difficult a question to answer and was therefore removed and new questions took its place. There was also a question on academic quality and the responses to that question produced two differing viewpoints:

- 1) A person – that respondents reported academic quality as relating to a person and how they conducted teaching in a tutorial setting.
- 2) Academic quality as the institution and the institution's reputation.

This was rearranged in the final interview schedule to a more specific question on teaching quality. There were also a number of personal accounts of what was seen as 'quality' and this aspect was further encouraged in the main study for two reasons: first as a means of allowing participants to relax and reflect on personal perceptions and examples of what to them was a 'quality' experience, and second as concepts of quality these anecdotes could be illustrative.

The perceptions I was able to identify at the pilot study stage were: that each stakeholder group felt they were in the best position to evaluate teaching quality; some interviewees referred to prior experience of other quality assurance systems such as ISO9000; and the notion that perceptions and conceptions of quality related to personal experience.

Therefore, questions relating to personal experience were included in the main study, as recommended by Giorgi (1986). An interview guide was developed from the literature review and pilot study and a copy can be found in appendix B. The main research study, the analysis of the study and the findings are provided in the next chapter.

In phenomenographical research there appeared to be little reported information on how, if at all, phenomenography had been used to look at differing perceptions between groups. I

found only a few studies that used groups rather than individuals as the basis of analysis: these were Dahlberg's work (1992) on nurse education where she used two groups of students and teachers and Lehtimäki's (2001) work on young male drivers where three groups were interviewed. Phenomenology too focuses primarily on individuals and their view of reality rather than groups. It was therefore an interesting proposition to use phenomenography and phenomenology to consider variation between groups rather than within a group.

In phenomenography there is perceived to be a qualitative difference between people's conceptions and focuses on different concepts taken from a number of individuals, whereas in phenomenology the emphasis is on individuals' conceptions. However, I assumed that I could use a phenomenological approach to elicit conceptions and perceptions of the phenomena and then group these as different views from a stakeholder group. In phenomenography, researchers group people's conceptions together to form a hierarchy of differences, but by grouping difference I conclude that there must be similarities of views within a group to make one group different from another group.

The main changes I made after conducting the pilot study were:

- Further development of the interview schedule based on interviewees' feedback on the questions and also new questions developed from their responses.
- To design a stakeholder analysis and to include representatives from those stakeholder groups.
- To use a phenomenological approach to the analysis, so that stakeholders views remained separate, but to also use a cross-case approach as in phenomenography to see whether each of the stakeholder groups placed the same level of importance on each concept.

5.9 Chapter conclusions

This chapter provided details of the data collection method, sample size and data collection procedure. The methods of data collection were discussed and decisions on data collection were made on the following premises:

- that both phenomenology and phenomenography provided respected methodologies
- both phenomenology and phenomenography provided some information on data collection and analysis
- that I could adopt a phenomenological approach to phenomenography.

From previously conducted phenomenological and phenomenographical research the sample size that was felt to be appropriate for this type of research ranged from 10 to 30, with 20-25 as the optimum number of single interviews with interviewees. This led to the decision to initially interview 30 stakeholders to include relevant informants for each stakeholder group. This number was increased to 33 interviews, as it was felt the larger study included a better representative stakeholder sample. Appropriate informant selection was based on stakeholder analysis and the relationship between stakeholders and distance higher education.

It was felt that computer assisted qualitative data analysis was not suitable for phenomenographic or phenomenological data, and 'hand' sorting and coding was more applicable in this study. The interview data was analysed using phenomenographical and phenomenological methods, before a final decision of using a phenomenological approach.

The pilot study provided information on question design choices and the beginnings of an analysis framework. It also allowed for reflection on the procedure and data collection method and data handling procedures.

Throughout the discussion of phenomenographic data analysis there emerged the constant reference to phenomenological approaches to the data; therefore, it appeared justifiable to finally adopt a phenomenological approach to the analysis.

Chapter Six – Main Study and Findings

6.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the main study into stakeholders' conceptions of quality in distance higher education. The study is reported together with the interviewee recruitment, data collection, analysis and findings. The questions in this chapter are:

- Are there any variations between and within stakeholder groups?
- Do the findings based on the analysis of the data assist in understanding stakeholders' conceptions of quality?
- How can the results be interpreted?
- Are the results relevant to the research question?

In previous research, phenomenography has demonstrated that there is perceived to be a qualitative difference between people's conceptions in teaching and learning activities (Marton and Säljö, 1984; Marton et al., 1993; Marton and Booth, 1996). However, in these types of studies, phenomenography is used to refer to findings of different concepts taken from a number of individuals. Phenomenology on the other hand is concerned with individuals' conceptions of a phenomenon. I have taken the view that by using a phenomenological approach to elicit conceptions and perceptions of the phenomena, and, through these findings, group the different views as in phenomenography, I can have a better understanding of stakeholders' views of DHE. Phenomenographic researchers usually group people's conceptions together to form a hierarchy of differences, but by grouping difference, I conclude that this must mean there are similarities of views to form a grouping. In this study, I am more interested in establishing the stakeholder groups' views than those of individuals, although each interview was analysed separately. Each separate interview was identified as belonging to a stakeholder group.

6.2 The main study

The study consisted of thirty-three qualitative interviews with stakeholders identified at the end of section 5.3, i.e. students; alumni; teaching staff; course designers; staff tutors; policy developers; employers; policy influencers; and members of the student union. Distance Higher Education poses particular difficulties when the research is based on interviews, since there are additional complexities to those posed in a traditional university, such as the reduced easy accessibility to key stakeholders i.e. students and on-campus teaching staff. This demanded researcher determination in locating representatives of key stakeholder groups and the interviews have to be considered in the light of accessibility, willingness to take part and identification of suitable representatives of the target groups. There was no specific order for the interviews, neither were they conducted in groups of interviews, e.g. all students during a certain period of time. The interviews were conducted in no specific order, rather it depended on the availability of the interviewee. It is acknowledged that the data collected and analysed for this thesis was a snapshot of the experience of the participants at a particular time.

The selection of potential interviewees was conducted in a number of slightly different ways, and unlike the pilot study, the interviewees were not always known to the researcher. For example, students from the single-mode institution were identified through personal contact with tutors and staff tutors, whilst students from dual-mode institutions were identified through personal contact or ‘snowballing’ from other students. Dual-mode institutions and the departments within them were known to the interviewer through the literature review. For example, one university was chosen because of difficulties the distance education provision had had with the QAA, and another was selected because it had a high level of DHE provision in a number of different faculties including marketing and education, and a third institution was selected because it had mainly engineering DHE.

Interviews with employers who had the experience of either employing distance higher education alumni or employees currently undertaking DHE courses were facilitated through contact details from the Open University's Business School, who had expertise and knowledge of employer-supported students. Policy influencers and developers were identified through researching the QAA guidelines for distance education and contacting those named in the distance education quality guidelines' working party. Additional policy developers were identified from the literature and included other quality assurance agencies, such as the British Association of Open Learning (BAOL). Policy influencers were senior members of staff who had the ability to influence how the guidelines were administered within their universities. The alumni were contacted through selection from alumni databases for a single-mode provider, and the senior members of the student union were named contacts on the single-mode institution's web site.

Referring back to the stakeholder analysis in chapter 5, I decided to look at the range and depth of influence each group had, before deciding on an approximate aim for the main study sample size. I decided that those who had by, my definition, low-level influence on developing quality assurance guidelines, but had the closest relationship to teaching quality should be the largest group. The smallest group were those with the greatest influence and were the furthest removed from the direct impact of teaching quality. This produced the stakeholder groupings in Table 6.1. As the interviewees were selected either through personal introduction or by researching the literature and establishing key figures in the area to contact, this can be termed purposive sampling (Judd et al., 1991).

Grouping	Number of interviewees	Membership of grouping
Low-level influence	20	Students (11), Alumni (4), Tutors (5)
Medium-level influence	9	Course designers (2), employers (2), staff tutors (3), student union (2)
High-level influence	4	Policy developers (2) Policy initiators/influencers (2)

Table 6.1 Stakeholder Interviews

If the targeted participants were not appropriate, I was usually directed to another more relevant colleague. The main research study took place over eighteen months between June 2001 and December 2002, and so the results must be set in the context of that period. The impact of time on the study is discussed later in the thesis, in Chapter 7.

- Nine of the students were studying at single-mode distance education institutions and two were studying with departments that provided some distance education courses within a traditional university department (dual-mode institutions). The dual-mode students were not from the same institution, but the single-mode students were all enrolled at the same institution.
- The alumni were all from a single-mode institution.
- Two of the tutors were from a single-mode institution. The remaining three tutors were from different departments in two dual-mode institutions.
- The two course designers were from departments that provided some distance courses in dual-mode institutions.
- One of the staff tutors was working in a single-mode provider and the other two in a traditional university with some DE. The term staff tutor has been used to denote a more senior person who supports tutor colleagues in their interactions with the students.

- The employers were senior managers who had employees that had achieved qualifications from a single-mode institution. These were large UK companies in waste management or pharmaceuticals.
- Both student union participants were from a single-mode provider.
- The policy developers were associated with DE provision as either academics or as policy makers.
- Finally, the policy influencers were both from a single-mode institution.

In total twenty-three participants were from a single-mode distance education provider and the remaining ten from dual-mode universities. These thirty-three interviewees provided the basis of the qualitative study.

The potential participants were selected after establishing their appropriateness to the research issue, and initial contact was either by email or introductory letter. I decided to make an initial contact with the key informants through a brief introductory letter or email explaining who I was, the area of the research, the reason for my interest in their views and that I would be contacting them by telephone a few days later. The telephone conversation was used to ascertain whether the key informants would be willing to be interviewed face to face; to request permission to record the interview; to further establish the research area I was focusing on and why they had been selected. The conversation would also give potential interviewees the opportunity to withdraw from the research or suggest another more suitable informant. If the person contacted was unavailable for interview, usually they provided a more suitable potential participant. In fact, nearly everyone from the initial contact was willing to be interviewed and in part this may have been because people are flattered and interested at the prospect of being singled out for an interview (Judd et al., 1991).

One other objective of the initial conversation was to arrange a convenient time for the interview, and where possible to arrange for the interview in the interviewee's preferred location. This was the favoured option, but alternative arrangements could have been made if it was difficult or inappropriate to conduct the interview face-to-face. In the telephone conversation, I took the opportunity to confirm the confidentiality of the interview and to gain their permission to use the interview, perhaps as anonymous quotations (this statement was repeated at the start of the interview).

Before the interview I contacted the key informant confirming the date and time. The confirmation letter or email (Appendix C) outlined the topics to be covered in the interview, so that interviewees had time to think around the topic areas.

6.3 The data collection

The data was gathered through face-to-face interviews, and conducted using an interview schedule (Appendix B). The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and approximately one and a half hours. All except one interview was audiotape recorded. The person who did not wish to be tape-recorded was one of the policy developers and extensive notes were made during and after the interview. All participants were asked for their permission to record the interview and to use the data anonymously in the thesis. The interviews were held in either the participants' working environment or study centre, so that participants felt at ease and in a location that was familiar and 'everyday' to them (Wilson, 1996). The interview schedule (Appendix B) began with questions based around the interviewees' relation to higher education, such as length of time studying or teaching. It was felt that these introductory questions should be non-threatening and 'break the ice' of the interview and relax the interviewee.

Once interviewees began the interviews they were all willing to provide as much information as possible. This could have been related to their need to please me as the researcher, but I think that they genuinely had views on what they perceived as quality in DHE teaching and conceptions of what quality was in DHE.

The interview guide served as a framework for the main body of the interview and acted as a reminder. Probe and prompt questions were used to elicit further information that built on the interviewees' previous replies. It also allowed me to follow-up issues raised by the interviewee, including unanticipated responses or further issues. In this sense, semi-structured interviewing was a more open and flexible research tool that documented the interviewees' perspectives.

The key questions used in the interview guide focused on quality as a personal experience, expectations of the quality of teaching for dual and single mode providers and how quality of distance higher education can be identified. The questions had changed from the pilot study to be more focused and the number of questions extended to over 40 topics. As can be seen from the interview schedule each of the questions had a rationale underpinning the question, so that they were relevant to the main topic of 'quality in distance higher education'.

6. 4 Analysis procedure

The audio-taped interviews were firstly checked for quality of recording and field notes made. The interviews were then fully transcribed and retained on computer disks as well as a computer hard drive. The transcriptions were read and re-read numerous times to gain an understanding and 'flavour' of stakeholders' perspectives. After reading the transcripts I then began to analyse the data by indicating where units of meaning change, by putting

‘slashes’ (/) in the transcripts, as illustrated in chapter 5, section 5.7 (examples of the transcripts are in Appendices D and E).

This reading and re-reading enabled me to identify views and variations including outlying views and from this to immerse myself into understanding the conceptions held by individuals. This required me to be reflexive in my role as the researcher, but also to ‘bracket’ my previous understanding of the phenomena. This was more difficult than I first expected. I found it easy to empathise with the stakeholders’ views and to be reflexive, but ‘bracketing’ was more problematic. Therefore when I analysed the first sets of transcripts, I made some decisions that were later changed as I developed the technique of ‘stepping outside’ of my DHE knowledge as much as possible.

The meaning changes between the slashes were then read and where I interpreted an important change was made by the stakeholder I copied the phrase into a spreadsheet in a similar fashion to those advocated by Miles and Huberman (1994) and the National Centre for Social Research (Ritchie and Spencer 2002) (see Appendix F). The pieces of transcript were then printed as hard copy and cut up to allow for sorting and re-sorting into topics of interest. The pieces of transcript were colour-coded and identified initially as stakeholder groups and later as specific individuals. The meaning of each segment was then re-read to see if there were commonalities in meaning.

The analysis was interpretative and discovery-oriented where stakeholders’ views and variations were looked for, together with any views that appeared to be different to those of the larger group. From this, final conceptions were developed and are discussed in this chapter. The development of the concepts was through either closing categories down or integrating them with other categories to form a higher concept (Boeije, 2002). The

analysis resulted in twelve categories, which is a substantially greater number than phenomenography that frequently results in five or six categories of description. The findings are more in keeping with phenomenology, which usually results in a much larger number of categories and reflects the analysis methodology.

Extracts of the worked data analysis are presented in Table 6.2 and Table 6.3 for illustration and the spreadsheets are presented in Appendix F. It should be noted that the interview extracts in the left side of the table are then given initial comments and definitions in the right hand side. These initial definitions and personal comments were eventually transformed into the final definitions. The goal is similar to that of Boulton and Hammersley (1996, p292), to get a general descriptive sense of the content of the data and how analysis of it might be pursued.

6.4.1 Examples of data analysis procedure

Person A – Student (dual-mode institution)	
I think it takes, I think you've got to be motivated./ I think anybody who even if you join a club or a team or a night school class you've got to be committed to that./ You've got to put the effort in./ The distance education course we have to a certain extent some more flexibility, that you can do it on a Tuesday night or you can do it on a Wednesday night, erm, /I think the OU provides quite often a sort of course timetable and we've had a course timetable. That's helped a lot because you know roughly where you should be, and if you stick to that its regular small chunks of work. / I haven't had to give up much but I've had to be more self disciplined. /I think there are days when I think that I would rather be watching TV than doing this or I'd rather be going out somewhere than doing this./ On the whole its been quite useful and single minded.	Motivation
	Commitment
	Flexibility
	Structure
	Self discipline
	Motivation
	Reflection

Table 6.2 Data analysis example 1

Person B – Policy Influencer	
To try and get a more integrated approach. I mean that is what I think is the problem with departments that work independently./ And the sort of famous description of working with academics is that it is like trying to herd cats./ I think there are huge resistances to doing anything other than what they want to do at the time, yes./ I mean, having said that I think the OU by some miracle produces some brilliant courses (laughs) which students are inspired./ But I still think we could be more systematic by using quality of students./ And instead of which it seems to me that the stress is from external pressures and that sort of thing. With absolute standards and curricular bench marking and that sort of thing./ Which you know has a place, but I don't want it to dominate because I think it ignores what students' need.	Interaction Analogy Independence Inspirational/creative Processes Dominant ideologies Reflection

Table 6.3 Data analysis example 2

The segmented meaning units were colour-coded according to stakeholder type, for example gold markers were used for tutors; green for students; blue for alumni etc. An A1 size sheet was used to place each of the segments in groups and to move meaning units around before finally grouping the units into combined definitions.

6.4.2 Stakeholders' definitions

From the analysis, I interpreted twelve definitions that stakeholders were using in their conceptions of 'quality'. The definitions are presented here with the most frequently occurring first and the others in descending order. In the analysis, there appeared to be differing levels of specificity within each definition, and I have illustrated these levels within each definition with examples taken from the transcripts, which are in the right-

hand column of the table. The numbers given in the analysis refer to the number of occurrences and not to the number of individuals making that statement.

In the analysis there are three levels of specificity:

- where the lowest level are stakeholders' statements referring to quality, but not to DHE or teaching and learning;
- the middle level refers to statements of teaching and learning quality, but no reference to DHE;
- and finally, the highest level that refers to both teaching and learning and DHE.

These three levels are the same in each definition and are in the left-hand column. The reasoning behind the development of three levels was that, although stakeholders may hold similar conceptions about DHE quality, in some instances there is less specific emphasis placed on the concept, than on other concepts. It also provided a framework to understand the stakeholders' views. With this number of concepts, it was felt that discussing each one and integrating each concept with quotes from the differing groups made the whole analysis hard to read and to interpret the key issues, so a framework was developed.

Handling this amount of data and attempting to form a structure around the analysis so that a reader can understand the concept, were particularly challenging. I felt that the use of the three levels of statements was valuable in explaining how stakeholders held similar concepts, but that there was variation in the intensity and importance they placed on each of the concepts. The order of the levels is to indicate a move from a top- or high-level concept of quality and its relation to distance higher education, down to a deeper concept built on various perceptions and with explicit reference to distance higher education. A brief comment is made on each concept and the relevant stakeholders, and further discussion of the concepts is in section 6.5.

Communication – the discussion of quality in terms of communication.

<p>Explicit statements occurred, but without any direct reference to distance higher education teaching and learning.</p>	<p>35 statements (6 by students, 18 tutors, 4 designers, 7 staff tutors)</p> <p><i>"To try and get a more integrated approach, I mean that is what I think is the problem with departments that work independently."</i> (course designer)</p> <p><i>"The thing that matters the most is a sense of being communicated with in a way that gives you confidence that the person giving this service really does understand what they are doing."</i> (tutor)</p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred and some reference to teaching and learning quality, but no reference to distance higher education.</p>	<p>96 statements (37 by students, 10 alumni, 21 tutors, 7 staff tutor, 12 student union, 4 policy developer, 5 policy influencers)</p> <p><i>"I use a lot [the university's communication media] and the Yahoo group because it is students talking and things are said, and you get many replies and lots of help and support. I think probably without that, it would have been a lot harder."</i> (student).</p> <p><i>"I know that we could phone the tutor and we could get the support there, but it is not the same as being in a group and having other people's thoughts."</i> (student)</p> <p><i>"Instead of getting to the heart of the quality and the content, it was really a fairly basic little set of building blocks, that you will have 'x' amount of communication with your students and you will have produced a guide that explains this."</i> (student union)</p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred in explicit reference to effects on distance higher education teaching quality.</p>	<p>34 statements (6 by students, 8 tutor, 20 policy influencers)</p> <p><i>"One of the things that have happened because of the nature of our teaching is that we have to bring people together, academics together, to work together in ways that they don't normally work together. And I still think, I know there are some people who raise questions about whether the course teams is the best way of teaching, but actually it may or may not be, but one of the things that is still very striking about the [university] is the fact that you have to engage with your colleagues."</i> (policy influencer)</p>

Comment

In total, there were 165 occasions where stakeholders used terms and definitions that could be attributed to communication. The concept of communication appeared to be related to notions of working together and mutual support and was apparently important to many of the stakeholders in their daily lives when taking part in any service transaction. As can be seen the most frequently occurring statements at the mid-level made some reference to teaching and learning, but without reference to DHE. Policy influencers provided the most statements at the highest level, although this group comprised only two people. The most frequently occurring statements overall on communication were made by students.

Whereas employers did not include ‘communication’ in their interviews.

Credibility – the discussion of quality in terms of credibility.

<p>Explicit statements occurred, but without any direct reference to distance higher education teaching and learning.</p>	<p>35 statements (8 by tutors, 6 student, 6 student union, 5 employer, 6 policy developer, 4 policy influencer)</p> <p><i>"It has got to be handled very carefully because otherwise what you are going to do is thinning the custard"</i> (student union)</p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred and some reference to teaching and learning quality, but no reference to distance higher education.</p>	<p>26 statements (6 by students, 14 staff tutor, 6 student union)</p> <p><i>"In some countries like Hong Kong there is a definite concern about credentials and where you get them from. It's the intrinsic value and fulfils expectations."</i> (staff tutor)</p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred in explicit reference to effects on distance higher education teaching quality.</p>	<p>95 statements (40 by tutors, 12 student union, 14 staff tutors, 5 employer, 18 policy developers, 6 policy influencer)</p> <p><i>"There is still a colonial element to distance education studies particularly in developing countries such as Malaysia where a British degree is seen as better than others."</i> (tutor)</p> <p><i>"Some of the in-house students want the distance education materials. They think they are missing out."</i> (staff tutor)</p> <p><i>"But I think that one of the ironies of it is that because a lot of other universities, some of the traditional ones, are now going into distance education, it gives greater credibility."</i> (student union)</p>

Comment

In total, there were 156 occasions where stakeholders used terms and definitions that could be attributed to the credibility of the course, institution and its location. For example, many of the tutors' comments mentioned the value of achieving a qualification from a

British university. Only two stakeholder groups did not mention credibility, and they were course designers and alumni. This was in some ways surprising, as it could be expected that alumni would value the credibility of their studies.

Tutors were the most frequently occurring group, but what is surprising is that only student union officers provide statements at the highest level, when it might have been anticipated that all students would conceive DHE as a credible route to achieving a qualification. It may be that students automatically perceived DHE as credible and therefore it is implicit in their understanding and did not require articulation.

Pedagogy – the discussion of quality in terms of pedagogy.

Explicit statements occurred, but without any direct reference to distance higher education teaching and learning.	<p>6 statements by tutors.</p> <p><i>"Without everybody on board in the philosophy [of DE teaching] then we wouldn't provide a positive experience."</i> (tutor).</p>
Explicit statements occurred and some reference to teaching and learning quality, but no reference to distance higher education.	<p>89 statements (48 by tutors, 5 alumni, 7 staff tutor, 4 designers, 7 student union, 18 policy influencers)</p> <p><i>"Our greatest concern is the academic rigour. Not just the quality of the course materials, but a rewarding learning experience."</i> (tutor)</p> <p><i>"This is not just quirky but people have thought about the educational process."</i> (policy influencer)</p> <p><i>"But the core of it is students, and quality and standards, and actually as I say I think they come together because on both sides we are trying to make sure that we have got to make sure the student learning experience is a good one."</i> (policy influencer)</p>
Explicit statements occurred in explicit reference to effects on distance higher education teaching quality.	<p>31 statements (12 tutors, 8 policy developers, 11 policy influencers)</p> <p><i>"I wonder if people have devised the material and syllabus for overseas"</i> (policy developer)</p> <p><i>"But you can't avoid with distance education thinking about the way in which you teach, so there is something about distance education which... of the OU's claim to support open learning, which forces the people doing the teaching to think about their learning process."</i> (policy influencer)</p>

Comment

In total, there were 126 occasions where stakeholders used terms and definitions that could be attributed to pedagogy and the philosophy behind their approaches to teaching and

learning. The employers did not comment on pedagogy and perhaps this is because they were more concerned with the outcomes of higher education rather than the teaching and learning. What is surprising is that students did not refer, even indirectly to pedagogy.

The most frequently occurring statements were those that referred, as could be expected, to teaching and learning, but not to DHE. Tutors were major contributors to this conception, which could be expected given their prior knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning.

Convenience – the discussion of quality in terms of convenience and accessibility

<p>Explicit statements occurred, but without any direct reference to distance higher education teaching and learning.</p>	<p>66 statements (48 statements by tutors, 10 students, 8 staff tutors)</p> <p><i>“That is why I joined that one. Because it was around the corner and given that I knew that it was highly unlikely that I wouldn’t go, anyway, but at least it was on the doorstep, the more likely that I would”</i> (staff tutor)</p> <p><i>“You can slot it around your day rather than having to fit into a schedule”</i> (student)</p> <p><i>“Convenience of a location is OK. For example the location at night or the signposting”.</i> (tutor)</p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred and some reference to teaching and learning quality, but no reference to distance higher education.</p>	<p>No statements</p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred in explicit reference to effects on distance higher education teaching quality.</p>	<p>38 statements (20 by students, 8 tutors, 6 designers, 4 policy influencers)</p> <p><i>“The distance education course has to a certain extent more flexibility, you can do it on a Tuesday night or you can do it on a Wednesday night, erm”</i> (student)</p> <p><i>“but none the less because it is online it doesn’t really matter where the student exists you know.”</i> (designer)</p> <p><i>“We have flexibility of submission dates and we use distance education for flexibility”</i> (designer)</p>

Comment

In total, there were 104 occasions that stakeholders used terms and definitions that could be attributed to accessibility and the convenience of provision. Tutors, students, policy influencers, staff tutors and course designers referred to convenience and accessibility.

Again, tutors made numerous statements about convenience, however at the highest level students were the most frequently occurring group. It is not totally surprising that

convenience was not in the mid-level, i.e. teaching and learning, but with no reference to DHE, as these were primarily DHE stakeholders and if they were referring to convenience, then they may not be referring to a 'traditional' university.

Systems – the discussion of quality in terms of appropriate systems

<p>Explicit statements occurred, but without any direct reference to distance higher education teaching and learning.</p>	<p>23 statements (7 by tutors, 6 students, 10 policy influencers)</p> <p><i>“Codes of practice legitimises criticism”</i> (policy developer)</p> <p><i>“The control side is about checking up if you have hit certain targets, and the quality assurance is knowing that you have got systems in place, which mean that the way in which you work produces the results which then can be checked by quality control.”</i> (policy influencer)</p> <p><i>“I think just looking at the quality of the materials it is so much higher, and the course and the structure of it all seems so much higher.”</i> (student)</p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred and some reference to teaching and learning quality, but no reference to distance higher education.</p>	<p>60 statements (16 by tutors, 7 staff tutors, 2 policy developers, 35 policy influencers)</p> <p><i>“with absolute standards and curricular benchmarking and that sort of thing which you know has a place, but I don’t want it to dominate because I think it ignores what students need.”</i> (staff tutor)</p> <p><i>“I mean on the academic side one way in which you assure quality is through the appointments process, and the staff management process, appraisals”</i> (policy influencer)</p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred in explicit reference to effects on distance higher education teaching quality.</p>	<p>17 statements (7 by policy developers, 10 policy influencers)</p> <p><i>“The guidelines are deeply committed to resource-based model and travelling tutor model”</i> (policy developer).</p> <p><i>“the notion of distance education that is embedded within the guidelines is a notion of distance education as an add on to face to face and full-time”</i> (policy influencer)</p>

Comment

In total, there were 100 occasions where stakeholders used terms and definitions that could be attributed to appropriate systems in terms of some sort of structure and interconnections. Here some individuals also referred to negative aspects of systems and when systems broke down: *'passed from pillar to post when I am trying to find out something'* (tutor). Neither alumnus, designers, employers nor staff union stakeholders spoke of systems in their interviews.

Challenge – the discussion of quality in terms of challenge and commitment

<p>Explicit statements occurred, but without any direct reference to distance higher education teaching and learning.</p>	<p>30 statements by students.</p> <p><i>"I expected it to be hard work, time consuming, very diverse, and all those expectations were met (laughs)"</i></p> <p><i>"I don't think we have been wrapped up in cotton wool or anything, you know, we have had to work hard to obtain whatever grade we have got."</i></p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred and some reference to teaching and learning quality, but no reference to distance higher education.</p>	<p>38 statements (30 by students, 3 employers, 5 policy influencers).</p> <p><i>"You are constantly being challenged about how you think, you are constantly have to ...I mean, you are actually having to explain things to people who don't necessarily know, but who are very bright, so if you can't explain to them what you are doing then you are never going to explain to the students." (policy influencer)</i></p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred in explicit reference to effects on distance higher education teaching quality.</p>	<p>15 statements (12 by students, 3 employers)</p> <p><i>"My daughter has been doing an MSc with the OU and my son said 'no thanks, no thanks, too hard.'" (student)</i></p> <p><i>"The general student body, yes, you often hear them saying, particularly about their families 'oh my son or daughter is doing it the easy way. I am doing it the hard way and it is worth it because I am getting it with the OU.'" (student)</i></p> <p><i>"Employers like short sharp courses rather than OU courses which require longer term commitment." (employer)</i></p>

Comment

In total, there were 83 occasions where stakeholders used terms and definitions that could be attributed to the challenge of higher education and the commitment studying required as part of their discussion of quality. There were however, only three stakeholder groups that mentioned the challenge of studying and they were students, employers and policy influencers, where they appear to value the challenge as recognition of the amount of effort involved in studying through DHE.

Cost – the discussion of quality in terms of financial benefits, costs and bargains

Explicit statements occurred, but without any direct reference to distance higher education teaching and learning.	<p>53 statements (12 by students, 33 tutors, 3 student union, 5 employers)</p> <p><i>"...but it is a bit like (um) going out and buying a car for £500 (laughs) you know, you go out and buy a car for £500 it is likely that the car is going to give you far more problems than if you go out and buy one that has had a bit of a service record, well looked after, etc. etc. But something that you don't know the history of that looks as if it is a bargain may not necessarily turn out to be."</i> (tutor)</p> <p><i>"Getting what we expect for our money."</i> (employer)</p>
Explicit statements occurred and some reference to teaching and learning quality, but no reference to distance higher education.	<p>18 statements (6 by students, 4 alumni, 8 designers)</p> <p><i>"I don't think it's value for money, I actually think that it is way over priced for what I as a student got."</i> (alumni)</p> <p><i>"The market force because of the kind of university that we are"</i> (designer)</p> <p><i>"One of the things this university is very heavily involved in, and is one of the prime motivators is the global university alliance."</i> (designer)</p>
Explicit statements occurred in explicit reference to effects on distance higher education teaching quality.	<p>8 statements by designers</p> <p><i>"Certainly in terms of the global universities alliance, the commercial lines do a lot of marketing for us, so we know from the information coming back, which areas."</i></p>

Comment

In total, there were 79 occasions that stakeholders used terms and definitions that could be attributed to cost including bargains. Influencers and policy developers did not mention cost in their interviews, probably because it did not affect them directly. Marketing and cost appeared to be related, particularly for designers, and one interpretation of that is that

course designers have to produce commercially viable courses, that will be of interest and marketable to a student group.

Satisfaction – the discussion of quality in terms of satisfaction and fulfilled expectations

<p>Explicit statements occurred, but without any direct reference to distance higher education teaching and learning.</p>	<p>23 statements (6 by students, 15 tutors, 2 designers)</p> <p><i>"Service that means I go away satisfied and it's relatively painless."</i> (tutor)</p> <p><i>"I had three agents come round and I had an expectation of what I was looking for, and one agent who I have put my house on the market through, has fulfilled all my expectations. And hence that was a good quality service."</i> (student)</p> <p><i>"I think it is an exciting time, I really do, I am very proud and have an enthusiastic look about it [the course]."</i> (designer)</p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred and some reference to teaching and learning quality, but no reference to distance higher education.</p>	<p>23 statements (7 by students, 13 staff tutors, 3 designers)</p> <p><i>"Fitness for needs, for teaching."</i> (staff tutor)</p> <p><i>"Being satisfied really with the course"</i> (student)</p> <p><i>"I have to say, having said that I have really enjoyed it. I have really enjoyed opening my sphere of knowledge. It has given me what I wanted in as much as it has given me a voice."</i> (student)</p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred in explicit reference to effects on distance higher education teaching quality.</p>	<p>26 statements by students</p> <p><i>"I think this OU course is partly an over ambitious course, I think it is overly detailed."</i></p> <p><i>"I studied once in America, actually because I wanted to learn German and nobody could accommodate me. [student was severely visually impaired] And so I found this place and studied the German course, and it was very good and very well done. And the tutor was sending me messages on tape and I was replying on tape. And that was really good, so that I could judge my accent."</i></p>

Comment

In total, there were 72 occasions where stakeholders used terms and definitions that could be attributed to satisfaction (fulfilled expectations), and also dissatisfaction. Only students, tutors, staff tutors and course designers mentioned satisfaction, and usually in only brief statements. Students were the group who expressed the concept of satisfaction in relation to DHE teaching quality at the highest level. Members of group three (policy developers and influencers) did not refer to satisfaction in their interviews. This is interesting because part of their roles is to develop policies that ensure the student is happy with the educational provision.

Change – the discussion of quality in terms of personal change and development.

<p>Explicit statements occurred, but without any direct reference to distance higher education teaching and learning.</p>	<p>30 statements by students.</p> <p><i>"I mean, I hadn't studied with a view of a career, I had done it for the joy of it, but you grow in to them, and the idea of better career prospects kind of became more real to me."</i></p> <p><i>"I left school at sixteen and got pregnant and married early. This has given me opportunities to do things."</i></p> <p><i>"Challenging your views."</i></p> <p><i>"And all you need is confidence, confidence to be able to do it."</i></p> <p><i>"They gave me the confidence. I know I am capable of doing it."</i></p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred and some reference to teaching and learning quality, but no reference to distance higher education.</p>	<p>39 statements (24 students, 5 alumni, 7 staff tutors, 3 employers)</p> <p><i>"It is the fact that you study to keep your mind active"</i> (student)</p> <p><i>"I question things. I look at things in a different way."</i> (student)</p> <p><i>"Courses provide self-confidence."</i> (employer)</p> <p><i>"Yes without a doubt it has helped me in my career, the qualification has helped me in my career."</i> (alumni)</p> <p><i>"But you could say that for that individual the experience of study has had a huge impact on their overall life experience"</i> (staff tutor)</p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred in explicit reference to effects on distance higher education teaching quality.</p>	<p>No statements</p>

Comment

In total, there were 69 occasions that stakeholders used terms and definitions that could be attributed to personal development and was frequently referred to as personal change and growth. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the concept of personal development appeared to be of importance to students, alumni, staff tutors and employers. The other stakeholders did not emphasise this aspect during the interviews, and no one referred to change as explicitly relating to DHE. The reason could be that stakeholders did not perceive any difference between distance higher education and higher education, therefore referring to teaching and learning was axiomatic to referring to DHE. Although the self-management and determination needed for and developed by DHE could have been a factor that differentiated it from conventional face-to-face higher education.

Consistent – the discussion of quality in terms of consistency

<p>Explicit statements occurred, but without any direct reference to distance higher education teaching and learning.</p>	<p>26 statements (16 by staff tutors, 3 employers, 4 designers, 3 policy influencers)</p> <p><i>"Achieve quality by maintaining control."</i> (designer)</p> <p><i>"I don't go out in an inspectorial way making sure everything is alright, what I see my role as being is to make sure that the systems are in place, to make sure that the right sort of things are being done, and I can be assured that they are being done."</i> (policy influencer)</p> <p><i>"We have got to try and achieve common standards, or work towards common standards."</i> (staff tutor)</p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred and some reference to teaching and learning quality, but no reference to distance higher education.</p>	<p>19 statements (8 by tutors, 8 designers, 3 employers)</p> <p><i>"All managers coming out with the same qualifications."</i> (employer)</p> <p><i>"Standardisation of grades as quality standards"</i> (staff tutor)</p> <p><i>"So there are several points at which we can look at the materials, amend them and make changes that we want to, and basically 'is this fit or not?' So there is that kind of thing."</i> (designer)</p> <p><i>"Personally I've found tutors very good but colleagues have found it variable."</i> (employer)</p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred in explicit reference to effects on distance higher education teaching quality.</p>	<p>15 statements (8 by tutors, 3 employers, 4 policy developers)</p> <p><i>"Because you [DE provider] are nationwide we get consistency."</i> (employer)</p> <p><i>"Reading lists are sometimes sent to overseas students where the material is available only in the home institution on short term loan. What happens to the distance education student?"</i> (policy developer)</p>

Comment

In total, there were 60 occasions where stakeholders used terms and definitions that could be attributed to consistency and to consistent quality and control. There was less fluctuation between the levels of statements for consistency and was more likely to be referred to by tutorial staff. This may have occurred due to the nature of providing a constantly good quality experience to the student.

Creative – the discussion of quality in terms of creativity and inspirational

Explicit statements occurred, but without any direct reference to distance higher education teaching and learning.	<p>5 statements by policy influencers, 1 by a tutor</p> <p><i>“But, if the right staff is appointed it is also creative in terms of the ideas that people have got.” (policy developer)</i></p> <p><i>“Electronic resources are visually more sparkling.” (tutor)</i></p>
Explicit statements occurred and some reference to teaching and learning quality, but no reference to distance higher education.	<p>35 statements (7 by tutors, 4 designers, 14 staff tutors, 10 policy influences)</p> <p><i>“And the sort of famous description of working with academics is that it is like trying to herd cats. I think there are huge resistances to doing anything other than what they want to do at the time” (staff tutor)</i></p> <p><i>“But, I think that is only one part of quality and if you impose it too heavy handedly you might actually detract from the experience. Possibly not for the students, but I think definitely for the people who are involved in delivering it. That if you stipulate them too much then you are kind of.. you can take the sparkle out of it.” (staff tutor)</i></p> <p><i>“So to be creative, there are two sorts of creativity actually in terms of the learning process that I think we have got. (policy influencer)</i></p>
Explicit statements occurred in explicit reference to effects on distance higher education teaching quality.	<p>17 statements (7 by staff tutors, 10 policy influencers)</p> <p><i>“...by some miracle the OU produces brilliant courses (laughs) which students are inspired by.” (staff tutor)</i></p> <p><i>“Would have reduced the space for creativity that I was talking about in the beginning. And the challenge that we have got in higher education and in distance education is how you manage to harness the creativity and ensure that you don’t lose that, allow people to be creative, to do things that are innovative, that are new, that are exciting. At the same time as being assured that actually you are producing something which makes sense to the students.” (policy influencer)</i></p>

Comment

In total, there were 58 occasions that stakeholders used terms and definitions that could be attributed to creativity. The stakeholders that did not use concepts that could be termed 'creative' were students, alumni, student union, policy developers and employers.

However, creativity did feature distinctively for policy influencers. This might in turn be related to the fact that one policy influencer repeatedly referred to creativity. It must be remembered that even if only one person mentions a concept that it is relevant and might in fact be prevalent in a wider sample.

Experience – the discussion of quality in terms of prior experience

<p>Explicit statements occurred, but without any direct reference to distance higher education teaching and learning.</p>	<p>15 statements (5 statements by alumni, 7 staff tutor, 3 employer)</p> <p><i>“And I think it is about making sure that you know..a good quality experience, very often you get out of it what you expected to and then a little bit more, I mean a quality experience, as opposed to one that isn't.” (alumni)</i></p> <p><i>“I think we mediate process matter and can add some useful input out of our own umbrella experience.” (staff tutor)</i></p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred and some reference to teaching and learning quality, but no reference to distance higher education.</p>	<p>29 statements (12 by students, 5 alumni, 7 staff tutors, 5 policy influences)</p> <p><i>“So I think, erm, students will have almost unique experiences everyone at the kind of range of services that the university provides” (alumni)</i></p> <p><i>“But my own experience of working on course teams, what they are involved with is their own intellectual disciplines, their own peer group pressures, and particularly now with the pressure of TQA. So I think there is a huge mis-match in the institution between course production and the student's experience, absolutely vast.” (staff tutor)</i></p>
<p>Explicit statements occurred in explicit reference to effects on distance higher education teaching quality.</p>	<p>3 statements by student union</p> <p><i>“if you are a new student and you get a bad tutor you might just walk away from the university and the whole concept of distance education. Whereas if you have had a bit of experience and you have had some wonderful tutors and you suddenly get one that is pretty awful, then you know that that is something worth arguing about.” (student union)</i></p>

Comment

In total, there were 47 occasions where stakeholders used terms and definitions that could be attributed to experience. Prior experience of a service was also included in stakeholders'

discussions. Three stakeholder groups did not mention experience and these were tutors, policy developers and course designers.

The following Table 6.4 summarises the interpreted conceptions of the three stakeholder groups. According to some researchers, accuracy of qualitative data does not rely on numbers (Hammersley, 1992). However, the total number of times a conception is found within the data is noted in the table. To some extent, this combines qualitative and quantitative data collection, so that the number of times something is mentioned or where certain words used can be quantified. This is a similar approach to that used by Onwuegbuzie (2003) where inferential statistics are used for words arising from individuals or observations from the sample and heuristic examples are provided as levels of complexity. The table also indicates in parenthesis the number of individuals in each stakeholder group.

Concept Analysis Table

	Low-level influence (20)			Medium-level influence (9)				High-level influence (4)		
Conceptions	Students (11)	Alumni (4)	Tutors (5)	Designers (2)	Employers (2)	Staff tutors (3)	Student union (2)	Policy developers (2)	Influencers/ Implementers (2)	
Communication (165)	49	10	47	4		14	12	4	25	
Credibility (156)	12		48		10	28	24	24	10	
Pedagogy (126)		5	66	4		7	7	8	29	
Convenience (104)	30		56	6		8			4	
Systems (100)	6		23			7		9	55	
Challenge (83)	72				6				5	
Cost (79)	18	4	33	16	5		3			
Satisfaction (72)	39		15	5		13				
Change (69)	54	5			3	7				
Consistent (60)			16	12	9	16		4	3	
Creative (58)			8	4		21			25	
Experience (47)	12	10			3	14	3		5	

Table 6.4 Concept analysis

From the table it is apparent that stakeholders and different groups of stakeholders place emphasis on different perceptions of teaching quality. The most commonly featured elements between and within all groups were *Communication* and *Credibility*. In the next section, there is further discussion of the findings from the analysis.

6.5 Discussion of outcomes

The findings indicated that there was not just one stakeholder group referring to one concept, but there was a range in the level of importance placed on the concept. This is articulated in the analysis through the level of connection between teaching and learning and DHE. However, there is the influence of the number of occasions people spoke about the concept, which could be classed as a weakness in the analysis, and is discussed in the limitations section in Chapter 7 (section 7.5). The definitions from the analysis are used to aid discussion of stakeholders' conceptions of quality

1. The main study findings indicated that **communication** played an important role in stakeholders' conceptions of teaching quality. In society, there is a basic need for individuals to share feelings and emotions with others and to communicate when things are succeeding or failing. However, communication as a concept of quality may have indicated more complex structures and the desire to feel part of society and an academic community in general. Lack of communication can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction with the quality of provision, particularly by students as it is one of the ways that students gain support and guidance. Communication is an important concept to policy developers and influencers and was seen as the articulation of course design in making a good teaching and learning experience. At its highest level communication was seen as transformational in helping to improve the quality of the teaching and learning. However, communication on the

quality of the course for overseas students, may be of significant importance to the 'brand' or image of the providing institution.

2. From the stakeholder analysis, terms and definitions were used that could be attributed to the **credibility** of the course, institution and its location. For example, many of the tutors' comments mentioned the value of achieving a qualification from a British university. The qualifications were recognised as a high quality education and there was a notion of 'exceptional' and better than local education. This is one of the reasons that governments across the globe have become interested in assuring the standards of provision not only for their own universities, but also courses and degrees provided by institutions based in other countries.
3. **Pedagogy** was a very important concept in the definitions of quality, but surprisingly, not the most important in the analysis. Employers did not mention pedagogy, perhaps because they were interested in the resulting educated member of staff and not the process by which that education was achieved. It was also not mentioned by students, whereas for tutors this was the most frequently mentioned concept. Again, this is probably related to the understanding of the learning process where tutors are encouraged to reflect on their teaching and learning as aspects of a quality education. Perhaps this concept might also have emerged for other groups such as 'drop-out' students had they been interviewed. Additional groups and further studies are discussed in Chapter 7.
4. **Convenience** and flexibility, together with the perception that studying could be conducted anytime and anywhere, was a frequently mentioned criterion of quality. Stakeholders conceive that one aspect of quality in DHE is its flexibility in when and where the student studies. However, flexibility can only apply to some aspects and is not completely accurate for a number of courses where many of the courses

currently being studied in higher education are restricted by assignment submission dates and course start and end dates.

5. **Systems** appeared to be more important to students, tutors, policy influences and developers than to other stakeholders, such as alumni or student association. This could have occurred because these are the people relying on the system of quality assurance, or are designing the systems, therefore it is harder for them to refer to quality except through their pre-conceived expectation of what quality assurance should provide to stakeholders.
6. **Challenge** was only mentioned by students, employers and policy influencers and appeared to be related to commitment. In fact, when considered further this notion of commitment and hard work was only present for single mode students and all the employers and influences were from single mode institutions. This may then reflect the expected intensity of studying for a full undergraduate degree part-time, whereas the dual-mode students were studying for post-graduate qualifications over a longer period.
7. Staff tutors, policy developers and policy influencers did not mention **cost** in any context. This is unexpected, because as price and cost may have affected other areas of their lives, even if not affecting their perceptions and conceptions of higher education, and would then be present in the lower levels of the definitions. At the moment financial cost is an integral part of HE discussions and perhaps the policy developers and influences may not wish to discuss cost implication of studying. Cost has no direct impact on their work and they may not have considered quality as anything more than pragmatic approaches in 'how' to measure quality in DHE.
8. The notion of **satisfaction** appears for many of the interviewees to be connected to fulfilment and fitness for purpose. Quality is related to the concept of achieving

perceived expectations, where there is no gap between what was expected and what was received.

9. **Change** was usually referred to in terms of changing as a person. This conception was not mentioned as frequently as some of the other conceptions, but for students it was the second highest reported concept of quality, after Challenge. Students appeared to rate teaching and learning quality as transforming in some way through challenging and changing their status quo. Frequently in long-term outcome studies with alumni students, it is the **change** aspects that are most often mentioned.
10. **Consistency** and quality control appeared to be related for some of the interviewees and the notion of getting equal standard of provision of education no matter where in the world. Interviewees could be referring once again to the concept of quality as fitness for purpose, i.e. that consistency is equivalent in some way to the education being fit for the purpose it was designed to provide.
11. There was one argument that some forms of quality assurance leads to the reduction of **creativity** (Tait, 1997). In the interviews, a number of stakeholders spoke about creativity of both the courses and the teaching elements. Tait is referring to the creativity of tutor and course design autonomy within the curriculum and teaching, whilst DHE by its very nature has to be replicable and course materials frequently re-used over a number of years. Stakeholders' perceptions of creativity focused on inspirational features of the learning experience such as inspirational tutors.
12. **Good experience** and poor experience are related to **satisfaction**, where repeat purchasing is directly impacted on by poor experience. Experience was the least mentioned concept, and this could be because it was related to other concepts, that were articulated more elsewhere in the interviews. According to Harvey et al. (1993a), employers want students with transferable skills, so that graduates are to

some extent ‘fit for the purpose’ of employment. This suggestion was also considered in the main study analysis, but was not found to be present in the data, however experience might be related to the type of education, where DHE students are frequently older and already employed.

An alternative way of interpreting the findings in Table 6.4 would be to give each instance of occurrence in the category a value, in a quasi-statistical analysis. The major problem with this approach to the data is the different number of participants in each of the stakeholder groups. Therefore, larger groups would be more likely to provide higher percentages of the comments and greater impact on the concepts in general. For example, group one made in total 106 references to communication out of 165, giving a percentage of 64%. If the percentage is over 50%, it could then be said that for the majority of the group this is a salient perception of teaching quality. That would then generate the following analysis.

Group one, who are the students, alumni and tutors, of all the sub-groups placed the greatest emphasis on communication and convenience and they also highly rated pedagogy, challenge, cost, satisfaction and change. They placed the least emphasis on the teaching quality as being creative or consistent. In fact, within this group only tutors referred to consistency and creativity, e.g. tutor, single-mode: ‘Our exams office will say that that is really problematic because we have got to try and achieve common standards, or work towards common standards’ (consistency).

This implies that students and tutors can, to some extent, cope with inconsistency and would not expect the teaching to be particularly creative. It is important to remember that

students at this point are referring to two aspects of teaching. The teaching within the course materials and the teaching provided by the tutorial staff.

Group two, who were the designer, employers, staff tutors and student union, placed the greatest emphasis on consistency e.g. 'We achieve quality by maintaining control and we authenticate by insisting they come [to residential school].' (engineering staff tutor, dual-mode). Group two placed the least emphasis on systems and challenge, where staff tutors referred to systems only at the lowest level and with no reference to DHE. Employers were the only ones in Group two who wanted challenge as a part of DHE teaching quality, and again only at the mid-level with no reference to DHE. The greatest emphasis for this group was credibility.

Group three, the policy developers and influencers, placed the greatest emphasis on systems and no clear evidence of concepts relating to change, satisfaction or cost. This could be influenced by their prior knowledge and recognition of official documentation and university processes.

This analysis could be interpreted as an indication that grouping responses was not a basis for analysis. However, as individual sub-groups, e.g. students, then each group looks at quality in slightly different ways. This mis-match of expectations from DHE provision, could be termed as a gap, in that what is expected by each group is not met when the measures are those set by other groups. For example, 'systems' is important to group three the policy developers and influencers, but not as important for group two the designers, employers and staff tutors, or group one, students alumni and tutors. The gap between expectations and received service is the gap between what are individuals' concepts of what makes a good service and their perceptions of the quality of the received service.

The dominant expectation by those with the greatest influence on overall systems (group three), is that teaching quality should be consistently the same. This is similar to an ISO9000 style of systems analysis, (i.e. to ensure quality through a systems approach), so that individual items are constantly the same, whereas students feel able to cope with inconsistency.

In Chapter 2 of the thesis (page 55), Zeithaml et al’s (1990) definitions were outlined and here is a comparison of their findings and the DHE stakeholders’ conceptions (Table 6.5).

Comparison of Zeithaml et al (1990) and Stakeholders conceptions

Zeithaml et al (1990)	Related Stakeholders’ concepts
Reliability – the service is carried out in the way promised.	Consistency – where there is common standards of provision
Responsiveness – services are carried out promptly according to the customer’s needs.	Systems – in place to provide support
Competence – staff have the knowledge and skills required to deliver the service.	Pedagogy – academic rigour and competence
Access – e.g. opening hours, physical location.	Convenience – study when convenient
Courtesy – the staff are polite, friendly etc.	
Communication – keeping the customers informed.	Communication – talking and engaging with others
Credibility – the service provider is trustworthy, believable and honest.	Credibility – the provision has credible recognition
Security – freedom from danger, risk or doubt.	
Understanding the customer – the service provider makes an attempt to understand the needs and wants of the customers.	
Tangibles – physical objects that are needed to carry out the service.	

Table 6.5 Conceptions comparison

Unsurprisingly there were six of the stakeholders' concepts related to accepted service quality definitions. This relates to their discussions of quality in terms of service provision. Where they do not relate is in the concepts of Challenge, Cost, Satisfaction, Change, Creative and Experience. These concepts were usually the less frequently commented on in the analysis, and again this probably relates to the fact that stakeholders began to discuss quality as a service concept or perception prior to engaging in discussion of quality in terms of distance higher education.

6.6 Key findings

The aim of the research was to provide a greater understanding of the theoretical concepts of quality and how these are applied to distance higher education. Another issue tackled by the thesis is the extent to which stakeholders' conceptions of quality differ from each other, and finally a further aim of the research was to develop an appropriate methodology and to evaluate its potential as a research method.

In this section I consider the separate stakeholder groups and the order of priority for their concepts. This is to draw attention to the fact that different stakeholders have different priorities when it comes to quality of DHE. The concept which has the most impact is first and the rest are in descending order.

Students: Challenge; Change; Communication; Satisfaction; Convenience;
Cost; Credibility; Experience; Systems.

Alumni: Communication; Experience; Change; Pedagogy; Cost.

Tutors: Pedagogy; Convenience; Credibility; Communication; Cost;
Systems; Consistent; Satisfaction; Creative.

Designers: Cost; Consistent; Convenience; Satisfaction; Communication;
Pedagogy; Creative.

Employers: Credibility; Consistent; Challenge; Cost; Change; Experience.

Staff Tutors:	Credibility; Creative; Consistent; Communication; Experience; Satisfaction; Convenience; Pedagogy; Systems; Change.
Student Union:	Credibility; Communication; Pedagogy; Cost; Experience.
Policy Developers:	Credibility; Systems; Pedagogy; Consistent; Communication.
Influencers:	Systems; Pedagogy; Creative; Communication; Credibility; Challenge; Experience; Convenience; Consistent.

From this analysis it appears that stakeholder groups value the same concept to a differing extent although concepts can be found across all groups. This has implications for quality assurance where one stakeholder group defines the measures which are not the most important for other stakeholder groups. The result of the implication would be to include all concepts in any quality assurance design for DHE.

I did not use ‘pure’ phenomenography in the reduction of the interview concepts neither did I design a hierarchy of connectivity between concepts. However, I did develop three overarching concepts. There appeared to be no phenomenographic hierarchy rather there were three concepts that appeared to encapsulate the other described concepts. The three overarching concepts that I formed from the stakeholders’ conceptions when discussing quality in DHE I have termed Recognition; Respect; and Reliability. These can be seen in the following ways:

- Recognition that the institution invests in its staff and where course materials have time and money invested in them (*cost* and *communication*).
- That there is academic freedom to develop and deliver courses and recognition of the freedom to be *creative*.
- Recognition of students’ *challenges* and achievements in studying at a distance.

- The recognition and respect of the ‘outside’ world in their perceptions of the *credibility* of the university.
- Respect for DHE as a valid comparative education to traditional HE (*convenience*, and *credibility*).
- Respect for those who undertake part-time distance higher education (*change*, and *experience*).
- Respect for the *challenges* and achievements of those that take part in designing, developing and learning in distance higher education.
- The respect for the learners by non-learners (e.g. employers), for example one of the comments from a student union member was: ‘And people sort of respect that now because they understand the skills involved, and the lifetime learning experience, and the fact that they [students] juggle with families, work, and part time study, and come out with a credible degree at the end’.
- Reliability of *pedagogy*, *consistency* and *systems* to provide high quality teaching and learning *experience and satisfaction*.

To some extent processes, such as the reliability of the service, affect the concepts, but the majority of the concepts were reliant on perceptions and conceptions of what makes high quality DHE. The three overarching concepts came about because I started to reflect on what all 12 concepts had in common and whether there was a relationship. For example that the credentials and credibility of the overseas provision was important to student and teaching staff stakeholders.

Generalisations across individuals are of value, but it is important that the individual’s unique experience was not lost. There were points of focus that appeared to be central to the experience recounted by the participants, and although some generalisations are made

for ease of reading the data, the individual's concepts are embedded within the description of the concept.

It is always difficult to categorically explain stakeholders' concepts without recognising the researcher influence and interpretation. As far as possible 'reflexivity' and clear analysis of the data demonstrates the ways that researcher interpretation has been kept to a minimum. The concepts were related to experience and perception of what was expected for high quality DHE. This experience included personal expectations and emotional aspects, such as changing as a person and being satisfied with the provision.

6.7 Chapter conclusions

This chapter considered the findings from the research study into *stakeholders' conceptions of quality in distance higher education*. To achieve this aim a phenomenological phenomenographical approach was used to elicit the views and perceptions from the stakeholders. This particular qualitative approach had little previous reported usage either within an educational setting or within a service industry setting on which to base the analysis. This 'new' methodology enabled me to 'experiment' with the data analysis and to test out the analysis structure using a phenomenological approach.

Organising the findings and categories without using category analysis needed an approach to the analysis, which allowed for a relationship between the relevant level of each concept to the topic of DHE quality.

The aim at the beginning of this chapter was to consider the following questions:

- Are there any variations between and within stakeholder groups?

- Do the findings based on the analysis of the data assist in understanding stakeholders' conceptions of quality?
- How can the results be interpreted?
- Are the results relevant to the research question?

The aim was to establish if there was a relationship between experiences and conceptions of what makes good distance teaching and the relationship between conceptions/perceptions and perceived expectations (disconfirmation) of the education. The interviewees had experience of DHE, which led them to discussions of quality as perceptions of what had happened. For example, students and policy influencers frequently referred to communication as a concept of quality in DHE, however, employers who were not as closely related to DHE experience, did not refer to communication in their concepts. Their expectation and concept was completely different to the student concept and expectation of what DHE quality should comprise.

From the interviews, each group did have different concepts and levels of perceptions related to quality in distance higher education. This chapter reported the main research study and analysis and presented the concepts that stakeholders held. Further discussion of the findings is in chapter seven, but generally, there were consistent distinctions between the differing stakeholders and their conceptions of quality.

Chapter Seven – Discussion and Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

Originally, the aim of the thesis was to gain insight into stakeholders' conceptions of quality in distance higher education. However, during the period of the research (1997-2004) a number of factors impacted on the research, including changes to higher education quality assurance strategies. My personal research interests also developed, so that the thesis emphasis changed to one of '*investigating* what are stakeholders' conceptions of quality' rather than merely looking for their different conceptions. I wanted to know why stakeholders held particular views and conceptions. Although the research into the differing conceptions is still addressed within the thesis, I became more interested in the methods, approaches and methodologies of qualitative research and specifically phenomenology and phenomenography. My interest in both of these approaches as methods to gain greater insight into other people's perceptions and conceptions led to an awareness that both could provide information on differing aspects to the same problem.

A phenomenological approach offered the possibility of illuminating stakeholders' conceptions of the phenomenon 'quality', whereas phenomenography's base within teaching and learning offered the opportunity to elicit stakeholders' perceptions of distance higher education. Both approaches had been used in educational research and phenomenography had also been used in service industry research, so both were applicable to the research objectives. Further investigation revealed some similarities and associations between the two approaches, and this led me to consider, in particular, one stream of phenomenographic research termed 'phenomenological phenomenography'.

This approach had been used by other researchers, for example Theman's research into conceptions of political power (1983). Therefore, I concluded it was applicable to my

research topic. Having decided upon this particular approach and after conducting the interviews using the methodologies described in the literature for phenomenology and phenomenography, I began the analysis. This was the most problematic area of the research. I found little previously reported research that described in detail the analysis of phenomenological phenomenography, but where analysis was described in detail it was referred to as 'phenomenology'. Papers on phenomenography provided only limited discussion of the analytic process and where it was discussed, it had some similarities to phenomenology. In phenomenographical analysis, categories of description are developed, but there was very little information on the practical aspects of forming these categories, except that they 'emerged' from the data as reported in grounded theory. Finally, I decided to analyse the data in a similar way to that suggested by Giorgi (1989, 1997, Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003). From this analysis, I formed twelve concept categories, which I also analysed as differing levels of conceptions and perceptions in relation to DHE.

As background to this chapter, I would like to consolidate the previous chapters in terms of themes and rationales for why certain aspects were considered as more appropriate to the research.

7.2 Thesis overview

The first theme of the thesis was to examine the theories underpinning current quality assurance. This covered theories and methods in the commercial, manufacturing and service sectors (Chapters 2 and 3) and the consideration of a qualitative approach to data collection. The second theme of the thesis concerned the use of qualitative data collection and methodologies, particularly phenomenological phenomenography (Chapters 4 and 5).

The reason for this was to explore a number of differing approaches to qualitative data collection and to find a suitable approach. The final theme was the conceptual

understanding of stakeholders' perceptions developed from the pilot study (Chapter 5) and the main study (Chapter 6). Chapter 7 draws together discussions on the findings, conclusions and future research when answering the research question:

- **What are stakeholders' conceptions of quality in distance higher education?**

The research process associated with this thesis began with a review of the quality assurance literature within and outside higher education. The outcome of the review of higher education quality assurance literature identified a tension between an elite and a mass system of higher education, where governmental push to increase participation, appeared to be at variance to an elite education, if the elite view is that more students must equal poor education. This massification led to a perceived need to increase the assurance of the quality of provision. Quality assurance within higher education looked towards commercial knowledge of quality assurance and quality control, and therefore a review of these procedures was undertaken.

This area of the thesis identified a number of views about quality, its assurance and the systems to achieve quality. Quality could be seen as a process, where it is achieved through endeavours to cut out fault in the manufacturing process, or as an outcome from using high quality components and 'adding value' to them. Quality could also be achieved through competition with other providers, on the assumption that those of poor quality would eventually collapse, rather than quality could be improved by institutions and organizations being internally motivated to do better. This is more in keeping with a combative, conflict approach to deciding what constitutes quality rather than a collaborative approach, such as benchmarking.

In the higher education sector, Brown (2004 p.19) suggested that quality has two axes. One is power that is imposed by the state or the providers of the service. Second is communication and whether the quality assurance process is one that is closed, bureaucratic and judgemental, or open and dialogical in character aimed at assisting providers and improving their teaching practices. There are also other elements, such as administration, student records etc., which are included in quality assurance (see Type I, Knight & Trowler, 2000 in Chapter 3 of the thesis).

The second part of the literature review used Harvey et al.'s (1992a) analysis of quality to consider the appropriateness of their definitions, amongst others, as a framework for discussion on quality assurance strategies. Their empirical research focused on eight HE stakeholder groups: students; employers; government bodies; funding councils; teaching staff; managerial and support staff; accrediting and validating bodies (BTEC, CNAAB); and assessment bodies (HMI). Harvey et al (ibid) found that employers wanted graduates with transferable skills, whereas staff and students wanted better physical resources (library etc.) and adequate human resources to support teaching and learning. They found that quality assurers wanted sufficient graduates to meet the need for a highly educated work force and maintenance of existing standards, and the government wanted comparability of standards between courses and institutions and again the need for a highly educated work force.

Harvey, et al. (1992a) established five definitions of quality as:

1. exceptional – that it is something special
2. perfection or consistency – focuses on process and getting things right first time (zero defects)

3. fitness for purpose – quality is judged on something doing the job it was supposed to do.
4. value for money – focuses on accountability
5. transformation – that there will be a ‘qualitative change’.

Other researchers have used the definitions of Harvey et al. (1992a) about quality to understand stakeholders’ perceptions. Lomas (2002) sought to find out senior managers’ interpretations of quality and used Harvey et al.’s definitions, although Lomas only used four of the definitions because Lomas felt that ‘perfection’ was not a suitable definition. Lomas found the definition that received the most support from the 108 managers was ‘fitness for purpose’ (33% of respondents), closely followed by ‘transformation’ (31% of respondents). The other two of Harvey and Green’s definitions used in Lomas’s study were ‘excellence’ and ‘value for money’ which achieved 19% and 17% respectively. It is hard to establish from the published paper the spread of the point allocation as only a pie chart was provided and no inferential statistics. Further descriptive statistics may have pointed to particular types of HEI heads, e.g. post 1992 universities, and the type of definition which they say, is most important to them. The managers were also given only four definitions to choose from and they in turn may have had their own definition, which would have been a useful finding. One suggestion is that heads of HEIs are now more akin to heads of large corporations and have budgetary control similar to a number of commercial businesses in the UK (‘Servants of the People’, Radio Four, 30.03.04). My suggestion is that the heads of HEIs Lomas surveyed may have had views that were totally new and relevant to their own changing environments, and this was a missed opportunity to establish if they did have different viewpoints.

In Table 7.1 are the three sets of criteria provided in chapter 3, section 3.2 of the thesis.

However, in this table the institutional audit criteria that came into operation in 2004 are included. The Institutional Audit (QAA 2003) was developed after the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) and replaces the continuation audit, universal subject review and institutional-level review. The aim of the institutional audit is to provide standards for public information including frameworks:

- to understand higher education qualifications;
- subject benchmark statements to define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the techniques and skills;
- programme specification that clarifies what knowledge, understanding, skills etc that student will have developed;
- a code of practice for ten areas relating to good practice in the management of academic standards;
- finally, there are student progress files to make the outcomes or results of learning in higher education more explicit and valuable.

Additional views are now encouraged by the institutional audit, and student union representatives are invited to attend the key Audit meetings. A student written statement can be submitted to the review team and there is increased involvement with students where meetings with the review team can include the attendance of current and former students. In general, the Institutional Audit is a systems-based approach to ensure that all of the necessary comparable aspects are included. Within it, there are few of the criteria that Harvey et al. (1992a) regarded as aspects of 'quality' in higher education. However there are more of the students' views taken into consideration in the audit, and greater implicit use of Harvey et al.'s concepts of stakeholders' views of quality (e.g. quality as fit

for purpose). Other criteria outlined by Harvey et al., such as perfection, are almost unachievable in teaching and learning. What is perfect teaching with zero defects for one person is not perfect for another and therefore teaching and learning is difficult to measure in terms of perfection. There appeared to have been little research into Harvey et al's definition of quality as transformational and creating a qualitative personal change. It is easier to judge a service as 'fit for purpose' rather than transformational, partly because there are so many uncontrollable variables in transformation, such as social impact on the person.

Quality criteria

Criteria of Quality (Harvey et al., 1992a)	Quality Assessment of teaching & learning in UK Higher Education (1998) (1998a)	Guidelines on the Quality Assurance of Distance Learning (1999) (1999)	Institutional Audit (2003)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Quality as exceptional▪ Quality as perfection▪ Quality as fitness for purpose▪ Quality as value for money▪ Quality as transformational	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Curriculum design, content & organisation▪ Teaching, learning & assessment▪ Student progression & achievement▪ Student support & guidance▪ Learning resources▪ Quality management & enhancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ System design▪ Programme design, approval & review▪ Management of programme delivery▪ Student development & support▪ Student communication & representation▪ Student assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Learning outcomes▪ Teaching and learning▪ Student Progress files▪ Student assessment achievement▪ Learning resources▪ Code of practice

Table 7.1 Quality criteria 2

From the table it is easy to draw the conclusion that very little has fundamentally changed from the 1998 Quality Assessment of teaching and learning in higher education and the Guidelines on the quality assurance of Distance Learning (1999), to the more recent Institutional Audit. The QAA continues to use an approach where it is easier to measure student entry qualifications and rates of attrition than to view quality as a concept that includes transformation of the individual. There is however, an increase in the number of stakeholders involved and this is noticeable where meetings with student union representatives have been encouraged.

The literature review of quality assurance within higher education (chapter 3) included a review of the quality assurance guidelines for distance learning. Since the development of the guidelines for distance learning, there has been increased access to technology and greater use of technology as course and resource support within many higher education institutions (HEIs). This in turn has led to the notion that there are now more similarities than differences between mainstream higher education and distance education, and is termed 'blended' learning or e-learning in some areas. The implication of these changes means that one set of quality assurance guidelines could be adequate and should cover both forms of delivery. This also led to the description within this thesis of Distance Higher Education (DHE) as a term to describe all higher education delivered through distance education methods. At the present time (July 2004), there has been no development of a new set of DE guidelines and no clarification of the QAA guidelines on the delivery of online teaching and learning. Internal assessment of the quality of online teaching is also unclear as is the development of the internal evaluation strategies for quality assurance of online or e-learning (Jelfs et al., 2004b, Parker 2004).

7.3 Why study Distance Higher Education quality?

The decision to study 'quality' of DHE was justified not only by the fact that this was a growing area where assuring the quality was necessary, but also because of the increased growth in new forms of teaching and learning delivery and how these might impact on perceptions of high quality higher education experience. There had also been little previous research into the conceptions of quality in DHE, particularly in what for some researchers is an area that has become more recordable, storable and open to judgement (Mayes, 2001).

From the literature review it was apparent that research into quality assurance and the methods used to collect information on quality assurance relied heavily on quantitative methods. It was anticipated that qualitative methods of data collection had the potential to throw light on areas previously not considered. In fact, it has been recognised by other Open University quality assurance researchers that interviews would yield more in-depth information concerning how the concept of quality was perceived by participants over that of quantitative data collection (Palin, 2003).

From the research I felt that stakeholders' conceptions and perceptions of quality required in-depth interviewing rather than a quantitative approach. Researching quality also required a methodology that focussed on the primary stakeholders in DHE and not on a single stakeholder such as students. Institutional audits had relied on student quantitative feedback as measures of quality, which Doherty (1997) viewed as at best only providing logged results when it was usually too late to provide anything more than regrets. This together with Harvey et al.'s (1992a) work suggested that students' comments and monitoring of teaching performance are usually too late or lack the power to influence change. However, they are only one of the stakeholder groups in higher education, and increased stakeholder representation would be an advantage in assuring the quality of the educational experience as a whole rather than quality as separate entities, e.g. resources for students and transferable skills for employers.

The concern at that point in my research was who should be included in the data collection and how to access these participants. This culminated in stakeholder analysis (Burgoyne 1994) and included the actors, agents, interested parties and interest groups associated with the topic. In turn, this included students, alumni and tutorial staff as the actors, as they were taking part in the interaction of teaching and learning. The agents were the course

designers and staff tutors, as they mediated between the university and the teaching staff and students. The interested parties were the policy developers, the employers and policy influencers, as they were interested in the outcomes of the teaching and learning interaction, and finally, the interest groups included the student union, who had a political and referential interest in the quality of teaching. It was felt that each group of stakeholders had a different type of decision to make in DHE and would consider different aspects to have different levels of relevance and importance to them (Judd et al., 1991). This led to my grouping of the stakeholders into three groups, where their ability to influence the guidelines was defined as low, medium or high.

The decision was made to use the qualitative methodologies of phenomenology and phenomenography, as these methodologies allowed participants in the research to describe their perceptions and conceptions of educational quality as a phenomenon. There were many similarities between the data collection and analysis of phenomenology and phenomenography and an amalgamation of the two was used to gather the data and in its final analysis.

7.4 Research approach and findings

In looking for a research methodology to support research into quality of service provision in other sectors, phenomenography had been used in service quality research. It was suggested that a phenomenographic approach was a promising methodology for researchers to study the variation in how service quality appears to individuals, and the different ways service quality is perceived and experienced (Schembri and Sandberg, 2002a, Schembri, 2002b). The point Schembri and Sandberg made was that conceptions are considered fundamental to actions and that a phenomenographic study of service

quality aims to capture the widest variation of conceptions that consumers hold in terms of service quality.

Stakeholders' concepts that I defined from their interviews were not just taken from their heads, but interpreted so that discussion of their concepts can be held. There is reflexivity on the part of the researcher and from the findings in the main study, twelve conceptions of distance education quality were developed. These were defined and ranked according to the number of instances stakeholders mentioned particular concepts and definitions included the level of relatedness to the concept. The twelve transformed concepts were: communication; credibility; pedagogy; convenience; system; challenge; cost; satisfaction; change; consistent; creative; and experience. These were grouped under the three headings of Respect; Recognition; and Reliability.

The research was based on the assumption that the functions and processes of teaching and learning are to provide a definite outcome, such as an educated, motivated graduant body. The research attempted to identify which aspects make a good quality DHE experience. The distinction I am making is that outcomes are things that have arisen from the experience, rather than outputs, which are other aspects, e.g. how many graduates; or how many course completers; or how highly rated a tutor is by the students.

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, the original aim of the thesis was to gain an insight into stakeholders' conceptions of quality in DHE. This has been achieved to some extent, but during the period of the research another question has arisen, which is the applicability of phenomenological phenomenography as a research approach to understand stakeholders' conceptions. This developed into the following question:

- Are there any clear findings that substantiate, i.e. support the use of phenomenological phenomenography as a research approach?

Phenomenology claims to study how people perceive something (a phenomenon) and describe it to share with others their perceptions and emotions such as beauty, anger, sorrow. When engaged in discussions of quality there is the assumption that behind the use of apparently common terms, meaningful exchange can only occur because of the other person's interpretation of what is being said (Neave, 2002). In the thesis attempts have been made to ascertain if there is agreement by all stakeholders in the discussion of quality, and clearly there are not. Some aspects are not mentioned by some stakeholder groups and frequently not at the same level of intensity for each stakeholder.

To assist in researching stakeholders' conceptions of quality, phenomenography was used to find the limited number of ways of perceiving quality that can be usefully differentiated so that the descriptions can be used for some other (educational) purpose (Bowden 1996). Marton initially argued there was "an infinite set of possible perspectives" (Marton, 1978 p. 12). However, he later retracted this to declare that there were only a limited and finite number of qualitatively different ways that a phenomenon was experienced or conceptualised (Marton, 1981, 1986). Phenomenography provided limited understanding to the study and no hierarchy was developed from the stakeholder interviews.

According to Bree (1999), phenomenology is better at looking for perceptions than phenomenography, which is conceptual. In fact, in the analysis interviewees were more likely to provide practical examples of perceptions of quality to support their conceptions of what quality was to them. Therefore, the use of both phenomenology and phenomenography is useful in gaining an understanding of the way individuals mix

together perceptions and conceptions e.g. where it is perceived that greater use of distance education methods in higher education leads to the concept of credibility:

But in a way it has made the whole issue of doing higher education at a distance more respectable, more acceptable. (Student association)

The analysis of the data used a mixed approach (Sale, Lohfeld & Brazil, 2002, p.50) in that frequency of occasions a particular perception was voiced were recorded and used in the analysis of the level of each conception. This analysis was conducted because of the relatively new way that I had used phenomenology and phenomenography, and because there was no previous research to provide guidance in the analysis. This meant that I required something of a novel method to illustrate the wholeness of the data and its analysis.

The weakness of phenomenological phenomenography is that both approaches are trying to research two different aspects of the same thing. Phenomenology is looking at the individual, whereas phenomenography is researching concepts that are inclusive. Perhaps phenomenography is useful as an approach to teaching and learning, but has gone as far as it can in that it is only useful and relevant to pedagogy and that its applicability outside of pedagogy is not valid. Phenomenology, on the other hand is better situated to gain an understanding of people's perceptions and conceptions in a variety of settings. The study provides a greater in-depth understanding of stakeholders' perceptions and concepts of what is involved in a 'quality' distance higher education experience.

Although Harvey et al.'s (1992a) concepts of quality as exceptional, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation could be found in the analysis, (e.g. 'cost' as value for money and 'challenge' as transformational), there appears to be an additional criterion for quality that is related to communication and pedagogy. I have termed this concept 'respect': a concept of quality that is related to a feeling of being treated and communicated with in a way that recognises the individual in a mass system of teaching and learning. This is not the uniqueness and differentiation that Fornell (1992, 1996) speaks of in his work, but being treated as an individual. This was particularly acknowledged as relevant by a dual-mode tutor and staff tutor, where students are referred to as 'course members':

As a philosophy we use the term 'course member'. We have corporate clients who do not see themselves as students, so we are all members of the course including tutors and we feel this reflects the professional status. (tutor)

The concept of 'fitness for purpose' can be found in the overarching stakeholders' concept of 'reliability' which is made up of the concepts 'pedagogy', 'systems' and 'consistency'. I feel that reliability goes further than 'fitness for purpose' because as demonstrated in Chapter 2, water pressure reduction results in the number of reported leaks being reduced (Sheldon 1998). This results in the water pressure being 'fit for the purpose' of water supply and leakage measurements, but is a less 'reliable' service to the consumer. Reliability for DHE stakeholders is through the integration of consistency and appropriate systems.

The criteria of quality as 'respect' is discussed further in the contributions of the thesis in section 7.7.

From the findings, quality appeared to rely on clear communication and discussion, which is seen as a requisite need for students to fulfil their study obligations (Oldfield and Baron, 2000). Stakeholders did not include in their concepts the practical aspects such as library facilities and library opening hours, which are all present in the QAA guidelines, Institutional Audit and Oldfield and Baron's (2000) analysis of student needs. With greater use of technologically driven resource provision, there is less need for physical location of all library resources, e.g. journals. What is needed is electronic access to the appropriate journals to support students. In a resource-based teaching approach, students are more likely to need training in finding resources, evaluating resource applicability and relevance, and knowledge of when to stop searching for additional material, rather than opening hours.

The thesis findings are that quality has some 'unique' aspects, as in the differentiation of goods, so that quality is something in addition to what was expected. It is the personal communication and recognition of personal input that makes the teaching and learning experience individualised and respects the learners' needs. Interviewees referred to this perception of 'specialness' as covering all of their needs with a bit more added, 'that further mile', a feeling that service providers were doing that little bit more for the user.

In the quality literature there is the assumption that the uniqueness of the experience would make everything personalised (DfES, 2003b), therefore it would be almost impossible to standardise. However, standardisation and measuring standards has up until recently been the aim of the quality assurance methodologies. The only way that something can be measured is through standardisations or metrics e.g. minutes, hours, days, so that there is agreement between users. The thesis research identified a search for uniqueness that provided the recognition of a quality education. It is my suggestion that perhaps now is the

time to stop measuring things in a utilitarian way and adopt a more holistic view, so that measures are of a total experience of a course or module from all parties e.g. students and staff, and include qualitative views from a representative sample (collected systematically), on topics such as perceptions of ‘change’ and ‘transformation’ for the individual.

The main findings from the study had some similarities to other researchers and practitioners’ findings. For example, the findings indicate a more collaborative approach to conceptualising quality through communication and reciprocal respect and recognition, which is similar to the point made by Brown (2004, p. 19) about communication for quality improvement. There are also similarities with Zeithaml et al’s (1988; 1990; 1996) work on service quality as can be seen in the comparison Table 6.3 in Chapter 6, where six of the stakeholders’ conceptions are similar to their findings. Harvey et al. (1992a) concepts also have some similarities, i.e. value for money and the concept of cost, and change as transformational. Finally, there are similarities to the work of Knight and Trowler (2000) and their claims of what constitutes Type I and Type II quality. DHE stakeholders appear to substantiate more of the Type II qualities than the Type I. Stakeholders include in their concepts the same notions of quality as related to ‘creativity’, ‘communication’ and ‘self-fulfilment’ (change and challenge in the analysis) that Knight and Trowler suggest are Type II, where quality is quality for change.

Where the research findings and the stakeholders’ concepts differ to the QAA guidelines is that the QAA is more focused on systems and ensuring that administrative systems run smoothly. Although the policy influencers and developers did mention systems as one of their main concepts, this could be a reflection of their roles, where systems and the systematic analysis of quality assurance are part of their remit. What I found surprising from the study was that there was no mention of concepts that referred to research or

academic knowledge from any of the stakeholders, except in terms of pedagogy. There was no discipline specific knowledge that was required in stakeholders' concepts. Perhaps this has occurred because they saw that as a 'taken for granted' assumption.

7.5 Limitations of the study

There were certain limitations to the study: for example, the limitation of sample size is a potential criticism of many qualitative studies. As in most phenomenographic and phenomenological studies, the main research study was of an acceptable sample size, however, it has to be acknowledged that these were people willing to be interviewed and not those unwilling. Interviewees may have seen themselves as people who know about quality in DHE and have views that should be heard. The stakeholder interviews covered all the groups identified in Chapter 5, but on reflection another stakeholder group that should have been included were the families of DHE students. I use the term 'family' to refer to 'traditional' families of parents and dependent children (including step-families and single-parent families), and also to other family groups where students have dependent parents, or comprise two co-habiting adults.

Campbell (1997), although referring to employees' families, noted that the omission of the family as a stakeholder resulted in a lack of recognition of their 'stake' in the firm, implying that they are also dependent on the company for economic support and as such are stakeholders in the company.

If 'stakeholder' is shorthand for those people and things, which significantly affect the firm or are significantly affected by its activities, it is hard to see how the families of employees – of both sexes – can logically be excluded from the discussion. p.30

It could be said that by not including family members as stakeholders in higher education, then they are not acknowledged as being affected by the student studying. This is clearly not the case. Many students are reliant on their families for economic and emotional support, and for those financially independent students their studying may impact on the time resources available to the family. Families and social environment also shape attitudes and these could also be part of stakeholders' concepts. Omitting families from the thesis study could therefore be classified as a limitation to the study, one which could be rectified in future research.

Two of the variables which could have been relevant to the later analysis, were gender and age. Participants were not requested to provide information on their ages and I now feel that this may have been a relevant characteristic in that older stakeholders may have viewed quality in DHE in a different way. Older stakeholders may have either studied or worked in higher education at a time when quality assurance was not highlighted in the same way as it is today. They may also have taken part in HE at a time prior to the increased target of widening participation, which they may now perceive as diluting the 'quality' of higher education. Younger students may have similar perceptions i.e. that by letting in students that have few, low or no qualifications to study at university lowers the standards of the qualification. They may have had different attitudes to education i.e. as a commodity, and to themselves as consumers with 'rights'.

I now feel that gender may have impacted on the way that individuals articulate the concept of quality and interact within the higher education domain, for example in many of the phenomenographic educational research papers cited within the thesis there is little analysis or consideration of findings based on gender, and frequently gender is not cited as a factor for consideration. This appeared to be surprising, when gender research has

indicated that there are differences in male and female educational results based on social influences (Mac An Ghaill, 1994). In fact, many of the phenomenographic studies into teaching and learning are based in disciplines that have traditionally had a perceived gender imbalance, such as physics (Booth 2002), literary teaching (Carlsson et al., 2001) and physics and chemistry teaching (Trigwell and Prosser, 1997). The list could be extended further in research areas such as mental health (Koivisto et al., 2002), political power (Theman, 1983) and economics (Rovio-Johansson, 1999). When gender is mentioned in the context of describing the sample, such as *male* Volvo engineers (Sandberg, 2000) and 21 *female* patients out of 39 interviews (Schembri and Sandberg, 2002a), there was no analysis based on gender. So, in areas where the possibility of gender differences could be assumed, i.e. medical care, or education, there is no consideration that earlier socialisation or cultural impacts form part of participants' lifeworlds. For example, there was no consideration that female chemistry students may have differing interpretations of learning to those of male chemistry students in Renström's (1990) study of matter.

Hazel, Conrad and Martin (1997) claimed that many phenomenographic studies have excluded or marginalized women and women's conceptions of learning. Admittedly in a number of the phenomenographic studies, these were in discipline areas such as physics where enrolments are non-traditional for women. They also suggested that phenomenographers should consider gender in their purposive sampling so that attention is paid to gender differences in the analysis. From the analysis of the research data by gender, there was no perceived difference in the conceptions that men and women held. However there were differing ways that men and women talked about quality for similar concepts. For example, women did use terms that could be interpreted as connectedness, such as 'network' to refer to their support systems:

‘So, I had actually got quite a nice support network around me, and a partner who is quite happy to help out, and not kick up you know ‘have we got any clean clothes?’

Male students on the other hand referred less directly about their support systems as networks and being connected to others:

‘The local people I worked with I think have been OK about that, and I have got other responsibilities like mortgage, car, holidays to go on (laughs)’

When referring to the quality of teaching, again women had a tendency to use language that reflected their connectedness, such as ‘wedded’ and ‘parent’:

‘...that comes back to an area [student union] is wedded to and that is quality and credibility. Obviously [student union] like its parent the university...’

– student union member

Men on the other hand were more inclined to use directive language when speaking of teaching quality:

‘Students who finish will be able to set a standard, they will have achieved a certain standard, and that is important...’ - policy influencer

This was an interesting area and there is the possibility to conduct the analysis in this way, with a future view of publishing the results.

One other recognised limitation to the study is that no students who could have been termed ‘drop-outs’ or ‘non-completers’ were included in the stakeholder analysis. At the time of the study, I classed them as no longer stakeholders, but on reflection, they had been stakeholders who had decided for whatever reason to withdraw from their studies. This may have been due to the ‘quality’ of the DHE provision and therefore of importance to the research. Only one of the student interviewees was classed as disabled by herself and the university and no one in any of the other groups, again a factor that could be taken into account in stakeholders’ concepts. It could be that DHE is more convenient to undertake because of its reduced requirement to attend a physical location and that is true for all of the stakeholder groups.

There may have also have been interviewer influence. By that I mean the effect of either my age, gender or social role could impact on how people interacted with me as the researcher (Miller and Glassner, 1997). In a social world, how we interact with each other is based on social ‘norms’, e.g. deference to those with perceived authority or power. I could therefore have had assumed ‘power’ as I was also a distance education tutor, which could have influenced students’ interactions with me. There are however potential benefits of social differences, as the interviewee may recognise him/herself as an expert on a topic, which is of interest to someone typically in a more powerful position in the social structure (Miller, 1997). Interviewer influence has to be considered as a limitation, but in this research I do not consider it to be a major limitation.

In the thesis I organised the stakeholders into three groupings related to their ability to define teaching quality guidelines. One of the limitations of the research could be that the definitions of the groupings were incorrect, arbitrary or subjective and therefore the group comparison would be invalid, or less revealing than alternative groupings. There is also the

limitation in the characteristics of sample. The alumni, student union officers and policy influencers were all from single-mode institutions and none from dual-mode. This meant that analysis of the data by single or dual-mode could not be conducted with that as a variable.

On occasions one person or one stakeholder group placed particular emphasis on a specific area, and this may have resulted in one concept gaining increased level of relevance due to the frequently occurring topic. This could result in one person or group gaining undue influence. To counteract this, in the analysis where this might have occurred it has been highlighted, but it is felt not to be detrimental to the whole analysis.

From the data gathered I could have conducted other forms of qualitative data analysis, such as content analysis, which may or may not have achieved similar findings. I did not use content analysis, because it was the stakeholders' conceptions that I was researching and not their frequency of occurrences in texts etc. An alternative view is that what I have used is really grounded theory, because I have allowed the stakeholders' concepts to emerge from the interview data. I feel the difference is the role of the phenomenological researcher who is reflexive and empathetic and interprets the concepts from the data. I have structured the analysis in a mixed method that has led to a structure where levels of emphasis for each concept is identified and discussed.

7.6 Impact of time on the study

Quality assurance of higher education is one area that constantly appeared to be reviewed and changed during the period of this research. It provided an opportunity to reflect on the development and move from quality assurance to quality enhancement. During the period of the study, which started in 1997, there were a number of changes to quality assurance of

higher education, the most notable of which was the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997). This report brought about a 'lighter touch' to quality assurance and a move to institutional audit in 2004. In turn, this lighter touch has brought about changes in the system including less pressure on institutions to provide data and a move to a national student survey on student perceptions of HE experience (HEFCE, 2003a). Comparability of standards between courses and institutions can now be seen in the institutional audit arrangements, so that the burden on HEIs is reduced (HEFCE, 2003a, p 5 no. 9c), whilst maintaining accountability to government (HEFCE, 2003b).

The changes during the period of the research and the timing of the interviews had the potential to impact on the stakeholders' views. This was a period of flux within HE quality assurance, but also a time of growing use of DE formats within HE. This led to a growth in the number of HEIs which delivered all or parts of their courses online, at a distance or as e-learning. This indicates that there is a need for new guidelines that take into account the diversity of providers, provision, materials and educational delivery, guidelines that are not specific to the typical single-mode provider.

Although many higher education institutions have an interest in e-learning, the distance education guidelines established in 1999 have not changed, even though there have been numerous changes in QAA guidelines. The distance education guidelines in 1999 were primarily aimed towards providers of education for those who were already in employment and not for those who were entering higher education from secondary education (i.e. those that were the traditional concern of government departments). It appears that the DE guidelines are the abandoned area in the quality assurance debate, which is surprising given its growth. This could have occurred because e-learning or online learning is now viewed as more 'mainstream' and not at all different to what is being offered on

‘traditional’ courses. This opens up the opportunity to research into how people learn in online environments, which could provide further explanations of what should be included in a quality assurance framework.

The interviews took place over eighteen months between June 2001 and December 2002, therefore the analysis must be set in the context of the period during and after the interviews. The interpretation of qualitative data and the context in which qualitative data is collected is worth reflecting on at this point. Silverman (1993) suggested that the political or economic context would influence the research and that media influence might alter informants’ perceptions. In the study that might include recent events portrayed in the media, changes in government policy and reduction in funding. One of the criticisms that could be made about Theman’s research (1983) was that he conducted his phenomenological phenomenographic study into conceptions of political power during a time of political protest, without acknowledging the full impact the situation may have had on his findings. During the period of the interviews student loans were already in place and due to tragic events in America, there was less coverage of some of the UK activities in the media.

The passage of time and developing context for DHE has therefore had some impact on the study, and I have attempted to consider this impact in the thesis. However, there were many benefits to the study and in the next section these contributions are illustrated.

7.7 Achievements and contributions of the thesis

The DE guidelines have not changed between 1999 and 2004, during which time there has been an increase in e-learning, blended learning etc. and an increased use by many

institutions to increase their market share. At the same time there has been little research into guidelines for distance higher education, only for distance education.

There is now the opportunity to develop new guidelines which also incorporate the stakeholders' views of quality that are related to the twelve conceptions. There is a multiplicity of stakeholders in DHE who all have differing needs; some are utilitarian and pragmatic and others are aspirational. The research attempted to gain an increased level of understanding of stakeholders' needs through their conceptions of quality. It was felt that by understanding and respecting their needs a better, high quality provision can be achieved. In a move to 'lifelong learning', there should be a greater understanding of distance educational provision and its perceived quality. Up until now DE has not had the same political concern focused on it that 'traditional' HE has had with its secondary school entrants.

One of the achievements of the thesis has been the insight gained from using a phenomenological phenomenographic approach. This approach has provided a greater in-depth understanding from a wider selection of stakeholder groups so that improvements to quality assurance guidelines can be developed. With knowledge about stakeholders' conceptions of quality then a number of aspects for creating quality DHE courses could be distinguished to make the experiences as successful and positive as possible for all concerned. The research was able to highlight the differences between the currently accepted guidelines and what some key stakeholders perceive as quality, whilst confirming the complexity of the notion of quality.

The findings that are applicable to quality assurance are:

1. Stakeholders indicate a need for a more collaborative approach to conceptualising quality, and it is my suggestion that the guidelines should include the quality of interaction and communication in any measures of quality.
2. Views on the credibility of the institution and the department. These could influence recruitment and retention.
3. Does the course provide a reliable programme of study, e.g. consistent, satisfying and where delivery is part of the service to students.
4. Teaching practice can be improved through the knowledge of what each stakeholder group sees as important for DHE quality. For example, that students see communication as an important concept for DHE and teaching staff need to be aware of this concept.

The study has also informed theory, so that in the future, hypotheses could be developed from the theory, where the theoretical understanding of stakeholders' current conceptions of quality can then be transferred to practical application. The theory is that stakeholders hold similar conceptions of quality, but the level of importance of the conceptions are different for each group of stakeholders. That stakeholders do have different perspectives on the same things.

The contribution of the thesis to educational research methodologies was the development of framework of analysis and the practical use of phenomenological phenomenography.

The aim of the data collection framework was to create stable sets of items (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993) that were relevant to all the stakeholders. Attempts were made to be as faithful as possible to the stakeholders' conceptions through the framework of analysis and procedures. These aspects of the data analysis were very labour intensive. This was a new

use of the research approach that aimed to understand stakeholders' perceptions and from them, to integrate the perceptions into the development of any guidelines which would reduce the gap between expected and received outcomes. I could see very little differentiation between phenomenology and phenomenography at the early stages of my research, which led to the amalgamation of the two approaches. Now my view is that phenomenography is applicable to teaching and learning, but is less relevant in other service areas. Phenomenology does however, offer the opportunity to investigate stakeholders' conceptions of DHE quality due to its greater applicability to all phenomena.

From the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, I devised models that I felt could be applied to DHE quality assurance approaches. In an attempt to model the quality assurance theories and approaches used in production and service industries I developed a series of models that could be analogous to models drawn from other disciplines. As part of the thesis research development, models have been identified under the headings of medical, accounting, engineering and educational disciplines, and these were termed as:

- medical – make things better, cure ills of poor quality and improve the knowledge of why things have occurred without making things worse. This would incorporate such methods as those advocated by Deming and his 7 Deadly Diseases.
- accounting – statistical process control and performance indicators, where there is a need to improve quality to increase market share and increase income.
- engineering – mathematical modelling and statistical analysis, which aims to establish the best way to review quality and apply mathematical modelling or statistical measures to quality assurance. This would include a systems-based approach such as Six Sigma (Taguchi, 1986).

- education – learn from others, benchmarking, where knowledge of past events and experience are disseminated and passed on to others, so that the knowledge can be built on, developed and changed to improve quality.

Models are useful in that they provide information on what individuals perceive as the ‘ideal’ and how they approach situations with a particular model in mind. A model is usually a personal or subjective thing and is a simplified representation of a person or group’s view of a situation, to assist in working with that situation in a systematic manner (Morris and Chapman, 2000).

The thesis concepts of distance higher education were applied to the models and resulted in the following conclusions:

- medical – challenge, satisfaction, change. The medical model attempts to change the current status of the individual (i.e. make them better), to challenge the illness and to bring about a satisfactory conclusion in finding a cure.
- accounting – credibility, convenience, cost. These three concepts all relate to the accounting model because they increase and improve the market share, i.e. ‘good value for money’ and greater efficiency.
- engineering – systems, consistent, creative. Although creativity implies uniqueness that cannot be replicated, there are elements of creativity in engineering design, so that although the model is based on mathematical modelling and statistics, it was felt that creativity also came under this heading.
- education – communication, pedagogy, experience. These are all based on sharing of information, knowledge and expertise so that the quality of DHE can be improved.

I feel that the models do help to understand the approaches to quality assurance in the service and commercial sectors and have proved to be relevant to the stakeholders' concepts. However, I think that there needs to be further interpretation and again there is the possibility of developing these models to research of a publishable standard, particularly in how they can be applied to HE student attrition. For example, the medical model could 'inject' new ways of retaining students after diagnosis of the reasons for course withdrawal.

7.8 Recommendations and further research

With the increase in dual-mode institutions and courses and the increase of e-learning and blended learning, then one of my suggestions for further research is a longitudinal study of the effects changes to the system of delivery has on society. Quality is then related to the beneficial or detrimental outcome of the increase in mixed delivery of teaching and learning. The suggestion is that a study looks further into teaching and learning and delivery and the perceptions of quality using the two modes of delivery. The thesis study did not allow for the analysis of single- and dual-mode delivery due to the lack of stakeholder representatives in some of the groups and this could easily be rectified in future research.

Another suggestion is the monitoring and writing down of why courses change and the rationale behind changes, so that the reasons are transparent and not lost to other course developers. More communication between and within faculties of when things did not go well would assist the universities to become 'learning' organizations. HE in general is a very dispersed group, working in a competitive service market, where as pointed out earlier in the thesis, they are less inclined to benchmark against each other for fear of competition. It would be of value to everyone to find out what works and what does not,

and a recommendation from the thesis research, would be greater communication between and within faculties/disciplines/universities.

If quality is transformational (Harvey et al., 1992a), then society should be able to see this transformation over a period of time. HE is looking at outcomes of a better educated workforce, increased knowledge and the development of new ideas. One suggestion is a retrospective study that reflects on what has happened through the increased access to HE in the last 20-50 yrs. Not that there are more graduates, but that this increase in graduates provided, or did not provide, an outcome of new ideas, better ways of living and increased knowledge in the sciences etc. These are difficult things to measure and when it comes to measuring teaching and learning perhaps the focus should be on the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process, which is one of outcomes, often long term, and not outputs.

7.9 Final summary

This chapter has outlined a series of achievements of the thesis, particularly in relation to the qualitative research approaches of phenomenology, phenomenography and phenomenological phenomenography. During the process of completing the thesis, I have developed as a researcher and had time to reflect on the aims of the thesis. I would not have changed the aims, but I would probably have changed the research question to one of ‘on what basis do stakeholders have different conceptions of quality in distance education?’ This would research into when and why conceptions are formed and whether they are based purely on past experience.

I have established that phenomenology and phenomenography both provide insights into stakeholders’ views of DHE from perceptual and conceptual angles, and that in my view phenomenological phenomenography relates only to education and not to concepts in

service industries. Phenomenology on the other hand has the greater possibility to be used to understand concepts in Distance Higher Education.

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Appendix A

Topic Guide – pilot study

In this pilot study I devised the questions after reflecting on the main theories where frequently there is a blend of performance and process measures. Sometimes they are almost interchangeable or being used as interchangeable in the literature. I therefore established the topic guide with these thoughts in mind.

Performance Measures e.g. TQM and Performance Indicators		
	Systems	evaluation, feedback etc., quality control
	Academic standards	learning outcomes, student progress
	Student administration	awards, timetables etc
	Student assessment	types of assessment, grading etc.
Process Measures e.g. Best Practice and Benchmarking	Student development & guidance	prevention of drop out.
	Competitiveness	recruitment, word of mouth or reviewed. Staff/student ratio - RAE
	Relationship with society	improved education, growth in economy, globalisation
	Career development	staff & students, improved employee motivation
	Communication	language e.g. benchmarking, what is it? Communication of innovation

Questions

1. In what capacity are you associated with distance education?
2. Do you think quality can be measured? Please explain why?
3. Do we need inspections and a system of ensuring quality?
4. Do you have a model of what quality is in higher and distance education?
5. What are your expectations of academic standards/quality?

6. What are your expectations of administration in the university?
7. The total experience of higher education and distance education - what is it for you?
8. How can student guidance help in maintaining quality?
9. What would make you choose one university over another?
10. What do you expect higher education and distance education to provide?

Appendix B

Main Interview Guide

Questions	Rationale
1. How long have you worked (studied) within HE?	Background information as another variable.
2. How long have you worked for your current institution? (studied)	Maybe influential variable.
3. Has your employment (omitted for some groups) always been within your current role?	Role and Position may be influential in perceptions of quality.
4. Has the role changed over the past few years?	What is good and what is bad about teaching and learning.
5. How would you change the teaching and learning within your institution? (omitted for some groups)	Overall perception. Very negative relationship with institution may negate the responses or at least would give me something to explain their responses.
6. What's like to work (study) here?	Again, as background which may be behind their expectations and experience and be influencing the whole interview.
7. Please try to explain to me how you feel and experience life within your institution.	This is to look at where they are coming from, and their reference base. (Administration, Commerce etc).
8. Has the status of (name of university) changed over this period?	This is to try to lead into the areas of teaching and learning. To establish what they perceive as their roles and functions. Also, how their self-esteem is reflected by their public status.
9. Could you think of your experience as a (student/employee/etc) and try to explain to me what your experience is like.	How their perceptions of their roles influence their opinions of the guidelines
10. How do you see yourself when outside of the HE Institution?	

<p>11. Is your status affected by the Institution you work for?</p> <p>12. Are you familiar with the TQA guidelines?</p> <p>13. Do the guidelines influence your day-to-day work?</p> <p>14. Do either or both of the RAE and the TQA affect you in any way?</p> <p>15. Please explain in what ways. Why is that?</p> <p>16. How do you feel about the RAE and the TQA? By that, I mean as an individual and as an employee of a higher education institution.</p> <p>17. Have you encountered any problems?</p> <p>18. How does this impact on you?</p> <p>19. The term quality is often used in society, but what does it mean for you?</p> <p>20. Could you give examples of how you would use the word in the wider context?</p> <p>21. How do you experience quality?</p> <p>22. Both the RAE and the TQA look at the quality of a University and the quality of the academic contribution. Thinking generally about the issues of quality in the wider world, such as in any area of industry, commerce or education. Do you know of any</p>	<p>and the usefulness of the guidelines.</p> <p>Copy of the guidelines to show the individual.</p> <p>To gain base line information, and to understand their level of expertise in interpretation of the guidelines.</p> <p>Probe.</p> <p>To know where their knowledge is coming from and also to again look at how they are influenced by their perceptions in one particular domain.</p> <p>Their personal feelings will affect their judgement and emotional involvement with the interpretation of the response.</p> <p>To gain an understanding of what quality is. This is the major tenet of the thesis, and I feel it would be better left until a little way through the interview, after 'setting the scene'.</p> <p>Perceptions of personal criteria of teaching and learning, and how they use these ideas.</p>
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<p>other methods currently being used to measure quality?</p> <p>23. What do you think of the alternative methods?</p> <p>24. How would they be useful in looking at quality?</p> <p>25. What do you see as the main aims of a University?</p> <p>26. The aims of the TQA guidelines are ensuring the quality of Teaching and Learning. How would you ensure the quality of Teaching and Learning?</p> <p>27. What makes a good teacher? Could you give a personal example?</p> <p>28. What makes a good student? Again, could you provide examples?</p> <p>29. Therefore, are there ways to measure the quality of Teaching and Learning? Please explain. Does it vary depending on the circumstances?</p> <p>30. How about high quality learning?</p> <p>31. What do you think about league tables in general?</p> <p>32. For education?</p> <p>33. Are they reliable? Why is that?</p> <p>34. What do you see different</p>	<p>If teaching and learning is ephemeral for the interviewees, then this question would pose some difficulties. I hope to gain an insight into the difficulties they see in identifying good or bad teaching and learning.</p> <p>How the interviewees are relying on the tables for information and interpreting that information. Are these judgements influencing their choice of educational institution.</p> <p>To get the interviewees to reflect on the student experience for different demographic groups and again to</p>
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<p>demographic groups as giving to the University? (i.e. mature students, ethnic groups etc) What do you think are student expectations from HE?</p> <p>35. Have you any experience of student expectations? In what ways?</p> <p>36. Learning is frequently measured through different forms of assessment. What do you see as the best methods of measuring learning? Please explain.</p> <p>37. How would you measure teaching? What were your experiences of being a student? (of being a teacher?)</p> <p>38. Regarding distance education, do you have any experience of this type of teaching and learning? (amended slightly for single-mode institutions)</p> <p>39. Please explain what you understand distance education to mean. How do you think it feels to be taught in that way?</p> <p>40. Can you see any differences in terms of quality between DE provision and other forms of higher education? Is this based on your experience? Why is there a difference?</p> <p>41. With reference to DE and</p>	<p>understand their basis (where they are coming from). What do they see as the ethos of the university.</p> <p>Learning is difficult to measure and pass rates are used to measure the quality of the education, but are the methods of assessment used the best way?</p> <p>Similar to above.</p> <p>Experience information.</p> <p>Understanding of what DE is and perceptions of DE.</p> <p>Quality of DHE</p>
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<p>teaching and learning. Are there any differences in the quality?</p> <p>42. How would you measure quality for DE Institutions?</p> <p>43. How would you try to measure the quality of a higher education institution?</p> <p>44. How would you try to measure the quality of teaching and learning?</p> <p>45. Are surveys a realistic method to measure the quality of teaching and learning? Why do you say that?</p> <p>46. Have you any personal examples?</p> <p>47. Have you any final comments you would like to make about Teaching and Learning in Higher Education or Distance Education?</p> <p>Thanks for your help and again I would like to confirm you total anonymity within the thesis and any quotations are used for illustration purposes only.</p>	<p>To try to look at different stakeholders and what they see as measurements of a quality institution. This may vary somewhat from the quality of teaching and learning, but it may not. In which case T & L is the key measurement in the guidelines.</p> <p>Measurements of quality for most institutions rely heavily on the student experience. I would like to know individuals perceptions of this methodology.</p> <p>Just general comments that they have thought about as we went along.</p>
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Appendix C

DATE

Dear

Many thanks for agreeing to take part in my research study into conceptions of quality for Distance Higher Education Stakeholders. Following on from our telephone conversation earlier today, I would like to confirm the arrangements for the interview.

Time:

Date:

Location:

I expect the interview to take approximately an hour of your time and with your permission, I would like to tape-record the interview and to use selected quotes as anonymous examples in my thesis.

The topics I would like us to discuss are: what quality means to you (quality in everyday life); quality as relating to distance education; and what makes good teaching.

If you have any queries about the study, please do contact me on (01908) ***** or email me on *****

Yours sincerely

Anne Jelfs

Appendix D

Thanks very much. If you could just explain for me your title and your role here at the open university?

My title is XXX and quality in standards. And those are the two parts of my responsibilities which I think are held together really by some notion of the students and student learning experience. So the students bit is actually about student policy, student support, regulations, the delivery of services to students. I also end up getting all the complaints and appeals in many areas. So there is a whole, and in the end I have the oversight of the budgets of students service unit. So, that is the student side. And then there is the quality and standards side, which is my overall responsibility for the quality assurance, quality enhancement of systems of the university. But I don't have to ... I don't go out in an inspectorial way making sure everything is alright, what I see my role as being is to make sure that the systems are in place, to make sure that the right sort of things are being done, and I can be assured that they are being done. I also am in that context responsible for the university's engagement in external quality, agencies and Ofsted. Also in my portfolio is some responsibility for equal opportunities, and I have been chairing it, but the chairing of it is not part of my job, the equal opportunities office is part of my ? with students, so it is a student policy. But the core of it is students, and quality and standards, and actually as I say I think they come together because on both sides we are trying to make sure that we have got to make sure the student learning experience is a good one.

That is great. It is just so that we get an idea of the range of things that you are involved with. And obviously student services is quite important as well. How did you come into contact with the distance education, was it just through the open university?

It was just through the open university. Yes, just through the open university. No, I didn't start as a tutor, I came as a lecturer in open studies in 1979. I had seen OU texts before I came, but I haven't apart from that. I have since been a tutor and a student, I did my PhD here.

Did you? And?

And I have also been an undergraduate student.

Have you? And you are still studying?

I am still studying, I am registered next year to do 'D' whatever it is, no 'L' something in German. Yes.

What do you think that distance education and higher education means, what do you think that can offer that other forms of higher education can't? Or is it exactly the same?

Well, I suppose I am always reluctant to use the term 'distance education' actually for what we do. But it does seem to me that there is more of a spectrum, more of a gradual merging so that actually what we do at the Open University is close to a form of part-time higher education. But it is supported in ways that some other part-time higher education isn't. So if I run through the things that distance education can offer; first of all it does offer access to part-time education in context where other organisations can't, or other forms of teaching, it does provide access to higher education in situations where people can't otherwise get it, and that is partly to do with this part-time nature, it is partly to do with the fact that it goes to people who can study it where they haven't got access to bricks and mortar institutions. But I think distance education does something else, which has impressed me since I got here, one of the things it does is it forces you to think about the ways in which you teach, so it forces you to actually construct a more thoughtful, I think I means you have to actually think about the way the person using the material is interacting with it, and think about the way it leads into a certain direction. But obviously that can happen with other forms of teaching face to face. But actually it is a requirement of distance education, but it isn't with some others. And if I can just take for granted that you stand up in a class and lecture people, you just do it, I know that is changing and people think quite a lot about that. But you can't avoid with distance education thinking about the way in which you teach, so there is something about distance education which ... or the OU's claim to support open learning, which forces the people doing the teaching to think about their learning process. And I think what that offers, it is a bit different, is a genuine recognition of learning as being important. It offers, I think ... I mean, some of the things it offers could be offered and are offered

in other contacts, a lot of people offer part-time, other people can offer well thought through teaching and learning strategies. So that means that in the end what you need to learn in distance education is you don't actually have to go somewhere to do your learning, or at least you don't have to go very often to do your learning. But I think one of the important things that we have learnt about distance education is that in many cases having some clear connection with people, a teacher, a tutor, is something that is very valuable. But we have different, I think one of the things about distance education with the open university is that engagement can be thought of in all sorts of different ways, so it is about the telephone, it is about face to face, it is about residential schools, it is about written comments in the way we expect students to use that. It is now about the online interaction as well, so it is thinking about a range of creative ways in which again you have to think about the different ways in which the teacher operates. I think the heart of methodology of distance learning is something else, which is the division of labour between a course team and a tutor, which is probably quite significant. I am not sure, I mean I think there is something consumed because it gives the student access to what should be very high quality teaching materials, and then to support them in working through it in a clear cut way with people who are trained to help. And I am not sure that is always there in the same way of other forms of teaching. I mean, it comes back to the first point I was making about the fact that we have had to think about those things. But it does mean that we can make sure that what we are providing is a package that fits together, it should fit together, can fit together for all those things.

There were two things in that, that I picked up and I would like you to expand on. One is the creative way that you say that there has been a development of materials that people have had to think about how to do it, and then there was the assurance of that creativity, there was like the two elements.

OK.

Do you think the open university still continues to be creative?

Yes. Well, I think in the production of course materials from one sort to another, we have to be. You still have to be. And we are now doing things in different ways, we are having to confront different ways of producing course materials, and different sorts of course materials. Because of course traditionally it was just a print, and now

there are all sorts of different forms of print. When I came here everything was A4 and was clearly set out, and now we have many book ways of doing it, wrap around materials. And in addition to that we have had to use online, and we use CD ROMS and still use audio in one form or another. So to be creative, there are two sorts of creativity actually in terms of the learning process that I think we have got. /One of the things that have happened because of the nature of our teaching is that we have to bring people together, academics together, to work together in ways that they don't normally work together. And I still think, I know there are some people who raise questions about whether the course teams is the best way of teaching, but actually it may or may not be, but one of the things that is still very striking about the open university is the fact that you have to engage with your colleagues./ You are constantly being challenged about how you think, you are constantly having to ... I mean, you are actually having to explain things to people who don't necessarily know, but who are very bright, so if you can't explain to them what you are doing then you are never going to explain to the students. / So that is part of the process. / But, if the right staff is appointed it is also creative in the terms of the ideas that people have got. /One of the things the OU does is make sure our courses are at the cutting edge, or the leading edge or something like that because they are being presented over a longer period, and that is still true even with the new technologies./ And I think that forces us all the time to be thinking, to be using our teaching ourselves, as academics, as a process of learning and thinking about what is appropriate./ I do think that is still happening, yes. I am not working on courses at the moment, but I was a couple of years ago and it was ... different, I was working on a masters course. I came from a ... the last few things I wrote, one was for a new social sciences level one course which was handed out to 12,000 students, and which was brought across into disciplinary, and was breaking new ground in terms of trying to deal with complicated ideas, and indeed in some ways it was trying to think about teaching. Not all of the things work out the first time around so obviously they are reviewing and learning from them. But I think that course was quite good, interesting, very good experience. Again people were thinking, they were trying to think 'how do we measure successes?' and I went on from that to contribute to a course on a masters module in social ? which was quite different, it was more narrowly focused, it was on a different level, you didn't have to have teaching assumptions about teaching the difference in terms of what students could do and what they have access to. And each time you do it, it is a challenge, it is

something new. I mean, the danger is probably sometimes that there might be a danger ? it is a peculiarly isolated and collective way of working. And the second question you raised about quality assurance ...

Yes, it was more about quality assurance ...

I mean part of the quality assurance there, I mean it runs through a range of things, it depends on which bits of the process you are talking about. I mean on the academic side one way in which you assure quality is through the appointments process, and the staff management process, appraisals. Another is through the ? process itself has a role, because it does mean everything gets discussed far more fully than it does in others. There is also, I think, there are all sorts of quality control mechanisms (laughs) I mean lots of feedback, generally involved external assessors in the work they do, so that is there too. Everything just gets looked at by more people than most other places. We also have, I think if you look at quality assurance process in learning teaching solutions, they have particular processes for looking at materials as it comes in, partly through design, in terms of material, in terms of the different sorts of material. I think probably the most important thing though in the process is the feedback from students, and to some extent the feedback from associate lecturers as well, if you can capture that, and using that to ? the course. But some of it is just embedded in the way in which we work I think. It has to be, it is about that being the core of what we are trying to do, people having to always think about those things. Because everything we do is in the public domain in a way that it isn't the case with other institutions.

Going on from that you mentioned the QAA in the beginning, and they do have set guidelines for quality assurance, distance education. How much do you think that they actually match in ways?

Well, we have always said that we don't want to be directed under separate guidelines for distance education. And we expect to be judged by the codes and by the same principles as any other provider. And the guidelines on distance education that politicians have produced sit very uneasily with the open university because the notion of distance education that is embedded within the guidelines is a notion of distance education as an add on to face to face and full-time. So, they say things like the distance education should be of the same standard as face to face, which doesn't

make sense in our context. There is ? about they don't want you to send your staff overseas to teach, well that is not the way in which teach. So, my understanding of the guidelines and we have had discussions as you can imagine, is that they are principally intended for institutions which do not have distance education as their main activity. In our case, and of course this is another reason why we don't like to use the term 'distance education', but in our case we simply expect to be judged in the same way as other institutions. You know, we try to explain when we have subject review, well when we used to have subject review visits, we would spend some time explaining how our teaching systems were different, but also try to show how they led to the same sorts of outcomes that might be expected from a mainstream higher education institution. So, that is how we have sought to approach these things. And obviously that is what we have done, and as far as the QAA is concerned I think we have been fairly successful. And the significance of that from our point of view isn't so much that we managed to persuade the QAA but we have managed to persuade academics from other institutions with quite a different approach, and you know that the subject review ratings have been consistent, one or two exceptions. I think it is important to recognise how those guidelines were drawn up because they were drawn up, and we would see ourselves as meeting them, I mean there isn't a problem, anything that is in there we think we do, that is OK, but we think ... the reason that that was developed was rather different, it was about a concern for some of the way in which some universities were using distance education to teach at levels which were not at the same standards as their face to face. And of course were generally overseas. Now, of course the overseas activities of universities are not generally the subject of subject review were not because the QAA is only concerned with activities that are funded by ? so none of that stuff was part of the subject review. It was only ever reviewed as part of collaborative audit. So, that is why it is there in a code. But for us I feel no pressure, no need to be in a code because we are subject to same rules as any other university, because our distance education is primarily in the UK. But certainly what we do overseas we would see as being ? with what is over here.

Oh, I know it is. There are so many things that you have just mentioned, like the codes of practice, quality assurance, audits, there are lots of different ways what for some people they see it as the same thing. Do you see any difference in those sort of ways to describe? Because as I say, for some people it is quality

assurance, quality monitoring, audit, codes of practice, bench marking, the terminology goes on, and frequently.

Yes, well the main difference I would see as between quality control and quality assurance. The control side is about checking up if you have hit certain targets, and the quality assurance is knowing that you have got systems in place, which mean that the way in which you work produces the results which then can be checked by quality control, but it does it. I mean, in principle I am more interested in the quality assurance side, but you do sometimes have to do quality control. But as far as any other stuff, if I go through the different ... the different things that the QAA does certainly feel different, they may be part of the same process, but of course they didn't arise out of the same process, so you have audit which is converted from one tradition, and subject review which comes out of another. And they ... one of them is about enhancement and the other one is about in a sense checking up, which is the subject review. Subject review is really a quality control process, whereas the audit is allegedly a quality enhancement process. The difficulty of answering the question now is of course it is clear what we have got in the system. Bench marking I see as a standards issue rather than a ...

Quality ...

Quality assurance issue. Students who finish will be able to set a standard, they will have achieved a certain standard, and that is important although slightly different. I mean, I am actually highly sceptical about the bench mark that we have been given, they are already out of date. The codes of practice are also ... what is the code of practice? I mean ... arguably it is minimum service standards being identified. And I think probably they feed more into audit than into quality assurance. But it is hard to know because I am not quite sure how the code is going to work out now. I mean, presumably we are just going to be judged against it on whatever review they end up doing. And some of the codes have been quite helpful in making us think about what we do and how we operate, the code on disabled students, the code on exams and assessments, the code on appeals, the code ... what was it? There was another one, anyway, it doesn't matter, there are lots of them, and some of them have been quite helpful in making us think about what we do, and how we do it.

You said the codes is like the minimum and bench marking is comparing yourself with the best?

Well, bench marking isn't about ... my understanding about bench marking is about student outcomes really, it is not about anything else. So if you have got a degree in history it should have these features.

Comparable across universities? So if your degree in history from the OU is comparable to a degree ...?

That is the intention. Well, yes. Well it is not ... as I understand it, it is not about saying a degree in history from the OU is the same as a degree for a student in Oxford. But it is about saying a degree in history wherever you take it within a British higher educational system will be characterised by the following principles, and you will have achieved the following outcome. Except it is very broadly stated, so it doesn't tell you a great deal. It has encouraged, I mean ... I worry a bit about the way in bench marks have been used, in some cases they have been used I think to narrow intellect, or endeavour ... a particular discipline has said 'it says in the bench mark statement that we need to do 'x' if it is going to be recognised that are students are in the appropriate bench mark, and so therefore we have to introduce 'x' and make it compulsory'. And what that very often means is that there isn't space for some of the things that I think the OU have been ? . I mean, the other thing about the bench marks it is true of a lot of the QAA stuff is of course that it advises a lot, but they are guidelines, actually if you have got a good reason for doing it in a different way according to the QAA that is OK. And of course very few of our degrees are actually single honours anyway, so obviously we meet all the bench marks. So it is all a bit complicated and messy. I mean, it varies, I mean the bench mark statement varies significantly between, obviously not in content but in terms of style. But I did hear John Randle once try to explain what he did was make it easier for an employer to know what a person would be able to do because they would be an extract from the bench mark statement and they would know. And it struck me of having this vision of employers looking through the bench mark statements to check that over. But the university system is rather ? The other thing I would say about the QAA stuff just to ... partly because of all the debates that are currently going on is that in many respects in terms of regulation, the university sector has been treated relatively lightly compared to what has happened to other parts of the public sector. I mean, we have

had pay review, we have had people come in to share our concerns, asking questions and we have had to prepare an amount of paperwork which has often been productive, and often not been very productive. But compared to what happens when Ofsted come in, or when you are working in a social services department, which is when the social services inspectorate audit commission team come in to look at what you are doing, and not only can they, but they do, they can come in and pretty much say 'you are failing' and you end up within three months being privatised and it has been taken over. You know, we need to ... it is interesting to think about in many respects the higher education sector has been let off lightly. I don't necessarily mean that it has been terribly productive.

But do you think the lighter touches actually to some extent are better than the fear of being 'Ofsteded'?

The problem I have is I have dealt with both of them and I don't think that is a very good idea in the end (laughs). But I am not quite sure how to resolve it in a sense. I mean, I feel reasonably secure about the way in which we operate, as far as bringing different things together, as far as identifying different stages, we are developing an internal review process which I hope will mean that we can have an overview of how decisions are made and so on. And in a way we probably wouldn't have done it, it is not in a way we are doing it without pressure from QAA however light. I mean, in so far as actually the Ofsted and other things, I think it is better because it has enabled us to encrue what we ought to do. But it is also ... it has probably allowed some things to go unquestioned, I mean we have still got the model in which everybody said that elite universities are much better, and that is partly because of the lightness of touch. We go around and people get intimidated. But I don't think we would have benefited by a bunch of full-time inspectors coming in and giving everybody a hard time. I mean, I would have reduced the space for creativity that I was talking about in the beginning. And the challenge that we have got in higher education and in distance education is how you manage to harness the creativity and ensure that you don't lose that, allow people to be creative, to do things that are innovative, that are new, that are exciting, at the same time as being assured that actually you are producing something which makes sense to the students, that works, makes sense to what students are going to have to do when they leave the institution. That it is not just quirky but people have thought about the educational process. I think that is a challenge that we have to

face. And the difficulty is that I haven't always been very good at facing that challenge. But I am not sure any of the regulatory bodies have come up with ways of doing it.

From the conversation so far, there are another two areas that I am interested in; one was when we discussed a particular course and the assessment challenges that are within that course. And the other area is you have just been speaking about the lightness of touch, but also the tuition side to some extent, because we were speaking of the elite universities, the Oxford / Cambridge model, which is the one I was thinking of as an elite university, where perhaps not true now but at one time very much one tutor, one student, very small groups which the OU also works on a model of a group with one tutor. Does that imply to some extent that they have a more elite, a better quality and experience, if we went for the elite university with a very small group?

I will come to that in a minute. Lets talk about the assessment ... do you want to talk about the assessment?

I do understand the assessment process of that particular course because I tutor it.

Well, there you go. You understand what some of the problems were.

In itself is assessment and the way that assessment is done, the best way of knowing that a student has learned?

Well, that is what we were trying to do. I mean, the approach to assessment they were trying to develop on course was one which was explicitly trying to allow space for reflection, was trying to identify the difference between certain skills that can be identified. I think, I am pretty sure, it made it too complicated for students. I understand there is a lesson to be learned from that and there are changes, but I don't know because I am not involved in it. But I was involved in the first year, but what was interesting about that in the first place, and the context in which I said it was about people trying to think about new ways of making things, and they don't always work out the first time. The question of tuition is an interesting one. I think the ... I think actually that ... I shouldn't say this, but the approaches at Oxford and at the Open University are very different, there is different teachings. I think actually as

part of the learning process the Open University one is better, in the sense that it is thought through, so it is about providing something which you don't get in an Oxford system, which is carefully tailored teaching texts and teaching materials from which you can draw, and which you can learn, supported by a tutor. So in a sense you almost have one to one but it is through the teaching materials, and then that is supported by a tutor in a way that enables you to engage in those tutorials better, and to learn through the assessment process. And I think that is the model. I don't think the Oxbridge model is thought through at all, the Oxbridge model is left over from a medieval life. And actually it was ... sorry, it is a rather peculiar way of operating, very peculiar because actually the people who are teaching it are not the people who are assessing it, right? So you end up doing an exam at the end which is based on what you have been taught in a college through tutorial process. Alright, there are some things which clearly do give you advantages, some of the tutors are quite good, some of them mediocre. I mean, I went through that system, I have been through both, so I think some of the people talking, as an undergraduate, were not very able as teachers and actually the teaching in the OU is better. I mean, the thing about having one to one tuition twice a week, what that does is it forces you to do certain things, it does teach you to do certain things, it teaches you to perform, you can't hide, you have to be ready to operate on a one to one basis. But I am not entirely sure ... again I am not sure if anybody decided that that was a skill to learn. It is a very odd sort of process, and it is not queried, so you don't get assessed. So, I rest my case.

(Laughs) Just a couple of other little things, such as any comment on the rapid growth at the moment in higher education? Any comment at all, just a very general sort of thing?

... What strikes me about the growth is that it has not happened in a way that people would have predicted it to happen. Because what has happened is there is an opening up of the old universities, they have taken on a few more. Which has put on enormous pressure on the new universities to recruit, which I think has caused huge financial problems for them. So, that is one comment. Actually it has not worked in the way that one might have expected. There are far more students. Also, as I understand the evidence, it suggests that actually what has happened is there is a much higher portion of middle class children going to university, but we haven't managed to spread out to those groups which have not traditionally gone to university.

And there is evidence in the paper today which has suggested that that is continuing, so actually we are very good at getting more and more people from the same sorts of background. I think there are still about 10-20% we can still get hold of. I think the other thing is about ... I think there are issues around the expansion in terms of who is providing support for what. There is a very interesting debate I think, the government have decided to make a distinction between widening parts of participation and increasing parts of participation, so widening parts of participation is basically about identifying other people from poor backgrounds to get them to Oxford, and increasing participation is a percent target. But there remains a target of about 50%, and it is interesting because it isn't clear how you do that without quality, and the resources in some of the new universities have been very tightly squeezed, and we know there are merges and all sorts of difficulties in it. But in the end, actually the open university does offer some ways in managing to combine the expansion without the ? quality, partly because the tutor / student ratio is the same, and obviously in materials you can do all sorts of skills. The difficulty is of course, I mean the main difficulty and people have started to suggest this in some areas, it becomes more and more difficult to recruit lecturers. One of the things that is interesting about our student body at the moment is that in the last five years the proportion of students in the 18-25 range has gone up 5% over 9% so there are interesting shifts taking place. It is interesting just to think about what it means to expand our education, and I don't think we have spoken about it properly because ... I think we are probably beginning to see the re-emergence of even more complicated designs so that there is something which is real higher education and something that is the basic stuff that everybody needs to get. You work your way down and you have your universities which are OK, and then the new universities who have got a different role. A recent research suggests that there is a division which is I think becoming clearly by the day. You know that one of the arguments that have been made is that a lot of people just don't want to go to the open university because the government ? (mumbling). What is not happening is that more and more people are going to the same sorts of universities and getting the same sorts of privileges that those of us, like me who went in the late 1960s and early 1970s got because we were getting access to a different thing, they are getting access to something which is probably the equivalent in those days to getting an 'A' level, and that sort of way in which the meanings are changes. Like I tell a story in which experts I worked my life through, I got my degree, I ended up here, I was a professor,

trust me I am an expert, and it doesn't work like that anymore, nobody cares. It is the same sort of thing that is happening and gradually when it opens up the next lot of changes.

The final sort of thing I was interested in was in your own life, you know your own personal life, what does quality mean then? If you were going to purchase a car, washing machine, whatever it is, what makes it better?

(laughs) I tend to use very crude guidelines really on these things, there are things that I trust and have assumed all the time to me that are there and represent quality of a sort, so I tend to buy the same make of car. Yes, I do. I tend to buy the same make of car each time I buy a car because I have learnt to know and trust it. And it is true of others purchases. So, I suppose I go for branded goods of a particular sort normally. But sometimes I might buy things because I like the design. Sometimes I buy second hand things which wear well. I suppose I go for ... it is all consistent, I go for designs which are modern with exciting designs but also quite stable.

OK, thank you.

Appendix E

Did you just want to explain a bit about how open and distance education came to be in ** university? You know, why did **** university look towards that?**

Well, it goes back a good few years to originally, may be five or six years ago that the health and community studies started using distance learning packages with specific post graduate courses. You know, things like / where there was an obvious need, because people couldn't get into institutions to do their courses, they still wanted to maintain their own professional development. We run courses, so one of the very early things was to put packages like that, paper based packages, to distribute through the professional bodies. So that is one of the first ways that we got interested in open and distance learning. And really from that it has kind of grown over a number of years. There have been various projects that we have run within the institution where money has been provided to support staff in developing distance learning materials, or particular projects relating to learning technologies and things like that. So, OK there has been a top down and bottom up approach to the whole of the distance learning. And really, the market force because of the kind of university that we are, we have got a campus all over the place, as well as Buxton which is post 16 provision and things like that, and they work a lot with training and / centres and so on and so forth. So the whole culture really is very geared towards that kind of delivery. And if you think 'where will I locate it?' there is so many other institutions around us that you do start to look at other ways of providing new sources. And of course **** is a rural community, so again there were all sorts of reason why, if you look at the profiles of the students within the university, why a university like this would start to explore some of the other potential ways of delivery. So I guess that is one of the things that kind of prompted it. The other thing is that where you now / development and media, then this centre is primarily an educational development, and of course the media side of it. So it comprises four units, learning unit, photography and video, graphics and cartography, and / technical services. So, actually here within the centre all the resources are available to create the materials and packaging. And in a sense I think one of the big things, one of the big difficulties is if you are trying to create course materials and you have to go to 101 different places then people don't want to know.

If they can come into one single area and say 'right, this is what I am thinking of doing' and not only get the technical support, but they can also have support in terms of the academic support, for writing material and making that switch from face-to-face to online delivery. Then people are going to be much more likely to do it. So this centre in a sense, the three senior managers; myself, Chris, and Juliet, we have all talked at some point in our lives and we have come into the learning technologies arena. So, there is a kind of network of support of both technical and the academic, and work.

And so the pedagogues are helping in all of that service?

My colleague, Juliet, she is actually head of academic development, and really one of her main roles is working directly with academic staff to look at the pedagogy of the internet and different forms of delivery. So, there is the support. At the moment Juliet is doing that pretty much on her own, but obviously it is one of the things we will be starting to look at, how we manage that in future.

OK. One of the other questions I had was; do you try and sell any of your courses as such to external people, to ... I don't know Malaysia off the top of my head, do you know what I mean?

One of the things this university is very heavily involved in, and is one of the prime motivators is the global university alliance, GUA, but **** is actually one of the ... I think ten, but don't quote me on that (laughs) universities that is online delivery with a commercial partner providing the technical infrastructure. So we have ten sort of universities world-wide from the United States, Australia, Canada, Europe, and we are all providing online course materials. And all of this is under the umbrella of the GUA and that is mainly targeting China, Malaysia .. but none the less because it is online it doesn't really matter where the student exists you know. So that is one of the ways that we are approaching that.

Because it is just the materials that you try and control, how do you try and establish a quality assurance then of when it is sent out? Because sometimes .. is it translated at all, or is it only ever taught in English?

It is actually taught in English, and there is a requirement in terms of / provision within the consortium. In terms of the actual materials going out, we do all the

development here in the centre, so again it is the same thing of working closely with the academic staff, we will develop the materials onto the online format. And there are several stages, there is the initial proofing stage, so that once the material comes in it is online, then you notify the number of staff and say / and so on and so forth. Then there an internal pedagogue, and finally before it goes live there is an external review. So there are several points at which we can look at the materials, amend them and make changes that we want to, and basically 'is this fit or not', so there is that kind of thing.

I was going to ask where the impetus for the course come from? Is it a demand from out front, or is it someone here that thinks 'oh, this is great and I am sure people would want to buy it'?

It is a bit of both really. Certainly in terms of the global universities the commercial lines do a lot of marketing for us, so we know from the information coming back, which areas. So there are specific areas that we would look at and say 'right, we target those subjects on that curriculum area' or delivery in that way. In terms of internal markets, or a more sort of national and local markets, working parallel to the global universities we have something which the university does online, and we have our own online system, and we are currently developing a number of different MLE's(?), as most institutions are, you know. Because if you look at the kind of commercially providing / and all of those, everyone who uses them find limits. So what we are doing is developing something internally and our team are actually leading that development and as well as computing services colleagues. There is a split here between computer services and educational developers, which you would expect, but because we are so involved in the technical side it could be confusing, so there is a strong link between us, and we are actually developing our own systems. And again, I mentioned earlier that the university makes available monies to develop projects and a large amount of that money is available for any number of staff, once they have put their bid in, if it is accepted, to develop learning materials and for online ... some of it can be resources and things like that, and we have elements that we develop. Some of it can actually be for delivery online, and we will do almost anything in that kind of range.

Yes, because you seem to have quite a wide remit of ...

We just like to get our fingers into everything (laughs). It is one of those departments.

Yes, no that is fine, I think we have covered most of those. When it comes to assisting students, that was the other thing, MLE's as well, so that you can help the student. You know interchange and conversation and whatever else, do you support them in any other ways? What I am thinking of is somewhere like the Open University also provide some face-to-face tutorial provision. Not so much here on campus, but /

What I mentioned earlier was the training clubs, and we have a number of those spread around the county. In fact one of those exists in a pub. It is basically a space where there is a computer and the internet is available and we have facilitated who kind of rove around and worked different groups of people. So that is another thing that can offer, it is not just kind of 'there it is, fend for yourselves'. But there are big training clubs in various centres that people can access, and get hold of a tutor and things like that. And it is varies you know, some of the courses .. some of the health and community studies courses they run a residential week, others have kind of one day sessions where people get to come and meet the tutors and have some face to face contact. So there is a whole range that we are operating within.

So then how do you sort of assure that each facilitator is doing a very similar thing? Do you train the facilitators in any way?

Members will be members of staff, internal members of staff (telephone rings, tape switched off). I should have done that straight away, I don't think about things like that.

No, it is OK.

So, and certainly working with the global university alliance we have run a number of staff development sessions. Juliet and myself are both heavily involved with open and distance learning really, and so we will run all kinds of training sessions and getting people into technology, and how to respond, and what kind of things to do. But ... staff development, we will respond to any given need, so we will work with groups of staff across the institution.

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Yes. The other thing I was interested in is who do you think are or is the best group of people to assess the quality of a course?

Depends on what you mean by the quality of a course. Obviously here as with all other institutions you have validation processes, and we also have a requirement for / distance learning materials. So it is not automatic that if somebody / then they could transfer that, there is actually processes to take that we have to go through. ... In terms of the external review ... what we try and do is view external reviews who are already functioning an open distance learning arena. So then they are not looking at the content of academic / but they are actually able to see whether or not we are delivering what we say we are delivering. So I actually think it is a whole mix of people that are involved in quality.

Do you ask your students at all to / or to evaluate in any way?

All courses have an evaluation form attached to them. And in particular / through the Open University that is part and parcel of the course, it is actually there at the end of the course, and we do get feedback. And in many places we run pilots beforehand, you know. So, yes. so we are running pilots, we are getting feedback in that point, we are making amendments, and evaluation ongoing evaluation, and monitoring and picking up things. And there are also support boards and committees and things like that, where the students can go directly to those, representation for students. So there is a whole range of strategies available to hopefully capture these things.

Do you ever find from the academics, from where I am sometimes there is a bit of a ... how can I put it? A tension about the fact that a lot of the things we are doing, developing course materials for online teaching, isn't /

There is definitely a tension around that. One of the things I am involved in as well with other institutions, TL and TLT projects, and I do some consultancy work for the national co-ordination counsel. And if something that really comes across time and time again, I believe from the counsel is actually beginning to recognise that, particularly with learning technologies and this kind of delivery, that there needs to be a radical re-think in the way that we look at the research. So I believe there is yes, absolutely. A few years ago there was a real tension that 'this doesn't count' 'this doesn't count as research, therefore it is not beneficial to me, why would I want to do

it?'. So yes, absolutely, absolutely. But then there are other people who actually prefer to work this way, and there is a shift to look at this kind of level.

Yes. There is a sort of mind shift in development. ... What do you think of the other providers that are out there at the moment? Have you looked at any of those? OK, I just said about the Open University primarily because I am a tutor at the Open University and that sort of thing.

What are you a tutor of?

I do DD100 for social science. It used to be D103, but now it is D100.

Right. Well I did the masters in open and distance education with the OU.

Oh, did you?

Online.

With IET?

Yes, that is right. Yes. ...

Well give me that, because I mean I do know the MA in open and distance education, and I have also worked at it at some point in IET. So actually I would be quite interested, as a student, what did you think? I mean, you have been at the other end, you see now you are at both ends.

That was partly one of the main reasons I wanted to do the course was really to experience the students experience, so that as a provider and a developer, I found it absolutely essential that I had a real understanding of the need. In terms of the content, the content of the course .. you know that was fine, I didn't have any / about that. And to be fair when I was doing it, I was actually trying to do too much myself probably. I think they are quite good at the theory around open and distance education, and not so good at the practice. They think they are, but actually the reality in the end ... and this is not a / I practically opted out because I felt it was a waste of my time. It was just an absolute waste of my time. What I really wanted, that was a paper based package that had gone up, and not what I would expect. Fine, if you have got the time, if you are busy professionals which most people are in this kind of arena, you don't want to be messing about responding to some stupid question.

And I suspect that to be fair to the OU, it was very much about the kind of individuals that would do something like that, very kind of ... professionals in the field. So you are going to be very '... no, don't mess me about, I haven't got time for this', so that was my main criticism, that I really felt for me if there was a paper based package I could go away and do it when I wanted to.

It hasn't made that big transition. Because a lot of ... say for example DD100, which is a social science foundation course, that is all paper based, you know you get your blocks, you get your / that sort of thing. And what you have just sort of said, or to me have said, is that it was still the same but now it needs to be put online. Am I right in that interpretation?

Yes and no. I mean, certainly ... I am just trying to think ... a lot of it because it is / level which is fine that is what I like. I think you know, what I have to recognise is that there is certain learning styles obviously that / have, and my learning styles are not particularly compatible with learning online, in terms of ... I am quite happy to work with the computer and get my resources and find stuff like that, and use it that way. But in terms of actual contact with my peer groups and supporting me as a learner, then I still think there is a long way to go, we have got an awful lot to do. I actually like the personal ... if you give me the option I can e-mail or I can ring you, I will ring you and speak to you. I will e-mail you after that, but I actually like to get to know ... and so certain things, this kind of business of 'introduce yourself' 'no thank you, I have no idea who these people are, no idea, you think I am going to make myself vulnerable, forget it'. I mean, I think that is probably an extreme view. But I think part of that is because I react in that way, because I don't actually think they take notice of people, it is kind of dismissed and there is a lack of recognition, and not many people will bear their soul online to people they have never met. So expecting us to be buddy, isn't real, it doesn't work, it is not good for that kind of thing, you need to build up a lot more trust before ... it is all very personal, before you would engage on that level, before I would engage on that level. You know, and I can think ... it does raise a lot of issues for me, in terms of ... it is often quoted as being a great equaliser, you don't know what people are ... you know, all of these things. But then when you are having this 'introduce yourself' and you know 'I am Joe Bloggs and I am married, and I have got 2 children, blaa, blaa, blaa' that is immediately setting some parameters. Well, where does that put the individual that doesn't fit into those nice

neat slots? So, somebody who is gay. So I think a lot of research can be done looking into that, you know. So, I still think there are a lot of issues. A lot of issues to resolve.

About that subject. Has it helped at all in your career? Was it paid for by the institution?

Yes. The institution paid for it, and yes without a doubt it has helped me in my career, the qualification has helped me in my career. I talked about the global universities and I am actually operations manager for the global universities for the university of ****. Again that is not a huge surprise if you think about the environment that we are in. It should clearly be somebody in this area that would take on that role. But I do think it has helped. And certainly in terms of talking to other people, and working with colleagues around the institution, the fact that I have done that, the fact that you know ... 'what do you know about it?' 'well actually I have done this' and I am glad I did it, you know. I wouldn't say I wasn't glad I did it, I found it ... very irritating, I didn't want to be bothered with it, you know this isn't getting where I want to go. But I am glad that I persevered with it in the end. If anybody said to me 'what do you think, would you recommend it?' I would recommend with reservations, you know I would say you need to be very clear with yourself about what you want to get out of this, and stick to that, don't get side tracked by 'oh I must do this discussion, or I must do that' get focused and go through that in the same way you do anything. Otherwise you are not going to make it.

A more strategic approach.

Absolutely.

Yes ... so what were your expectations of the course prior to starting? What did you expect?

It was so long ago (laughs).

It is quite a long course as well, it is about three years.

Yes, three years. What expectations did I have? ... I think probably the expectations that I had were ... the reason it appealed to me was it was open and distance education, it was not an examination, I loathe examinations. So that was big plus to

me, if it dissipation, right that is a tick so I will have to do that. The online delivery, it is actually quite easy for me because I work where I work, and I have the facilities, and even when I messed up I have got colleagues around that I can call on and say 'I don't understand, can you help me?'. So, I had actually got quite a nice support network around me, and a partner who is quite happy to help out, and not kick up you know 'have we got any clean clothes?' 'Er ... possibly' (laughs) you know. So, that was quite good. I think my expectation ... I don't really know, I honestly don't know, I have got very personal reasons for doing it. ... I think I probably expected much more interactivity, I expected to engage much more with the learning technologies, and have an opportunity to kind of look at that in a more in-depth way than we did, rather than simply using it as a way of downloading materials, discussion groups. I think I probably wanted a bit more ... if we are going to do this then may be a bit more interactivity.

Such as? You know.

... I mean in a way, more examples of you know ... an opportunity to do some video conferencing would be quite useful. Obviously that is quite a difficult thing to set up when you have got students all over the world. But, you could set up certain groups and things like that, but again it depends on technology, not everybody has access to that kind of technology. ... So I didn't really know what to expect, it was the experience that I wanted, you know 'lets see'.

Fine. No. What else? Any comments about the growth in higher education, the numbers and this sort of thing? Because obviously a lot of the push seems to have come from some universities because of expanding student numbers.

Yes. ... I mean, I am a big believer in access to education for everyone. ... So, any initiative that enables the non-traditional students access to educational materials and opportunities is something that I would automatically be interested in that. ... I mean, at some point it has got to ... even now, you can't continually ... so work based learning and / we have links with all of these things, and these are the things we would be really good at, the local communities and going out and addressing specific needs within work based learning and things like that. You know, lets be honest we are not a residuous institution. So I think you have to make those kinds of distinctions. And that is not to say that I think / are better than we are, I mean I don't,

I just think that what we do is you look at a market and you look at our strive and we / I mean that is what **** is very good at. So there is a commitment for a wider participation, there is a genuine commitment within the institution instead of 'well this is what the government are saying now, so we will take it on board'.

Sort of finally, I am almost at the end. One other thing and that is trying to define quality, because what I wanted is is there any way that you use in your day to day life quality, how you think of it? By that, for example, piece of clothing or a car, or whatever, what is that makes you think 'that is good quality' 'this is poor quality' or even 'that is the quality I can afford' (laughs)

Well, but that is important, I don't think you should kind of trivialise that aspect because at the end of the day for most of us, that is what it comes down to isn't it? So, sure I would like to go and buy my suits in / and things like that, but actually I can't afford to buy them there, so I look to other things. I think, you know you have a series of benchmarks in your own head don't you, that you go out and it is kind of like materials 'that feels OK, that doesn't' it is a very personal kind of thing. You know, I only like natural fabrics, so anything that isn't that then it is discarded, but there is a reason I don't like that. So that is one value. I think quality, you know we all kind of make personal value difference of that quality. Is it finished nicely, are things sewn in and stuff like that, and if they are not then 'no I am not too happy about that'. So I think we kind of have a series of expectations and make a valued judgement about that, and how essential is to me? Will it do the job that I need it to do? yes it will, so why do I need something that I am going to pay more for? And in some instances you make a decision to buy it actually because ... for no real reason, and other times you think 'no, this will do, this is perfectly acceptable'. And I think it is about making sure that you know ... a good quality experience, very often you get out of it what you expected to and then a little bit more, I mean a quality experience, as opposed to one that isn't. So yes, 'this is what it said I would deliver and yes it has delivered all of those things, and yes I have enjoyed doing that'. So I think there are all sorts of measures you know and you can look at it in an intellectual and educational point of view for quality, but you know very often the responses are much more gut reaction, and personal. And going back to the OU I actually think you know ... the cost of it ... I don't think that it's value for money, I actually think that is way over priced for what I as a student got. You know way over priced. And certainly had I been paying for it

myself, I would think of complaining, saying 'this is not on, you know, a dozen books, I can go out and buy a dozen books for £200, where is the added value?'. And then you think there is access to / and stuff, but even with everything taken into account .. I actually think in that instance if you are asking me about the quality of the OU courses in terms of value for money then I don't think they are. Overpriced. And certainly they are not ... you know if we are looking at open and distance education as a way of widening participation and brining in non-traditional students, then again no forget it, forget it.

It doesn't offer equal opportunities.

It doesn't at all. And so this kind ... you can see where my little beef is can't you really? I don't have to spell it out to you. But you talk about equal opportunities and that is my big thing. You know, if you have somebody who is a non-traditional learner, who has dependants and commitments, and so on and so forth, charging £2,500 for a one year course, no way! Because what other commitments have they got to spend, so it is not equal.

OK. Finally, it was just did you have anything else to say about quality assurance?

Oh, I could go on for hours. But you know, (overtalking) I don't think so. I think we have a number of systems in place, and some of the systems that we use for traditional / and I still think that there is a lot that we need to learn. I mean we are learning all the time ourselves, so long as we are involved with the global universities and other colleagues in other countries as well, and how they approach it. I think it is an exciting time, I really do, I am very proud and have an enthusiastic look about it. But I suppose I have this other hat that I can stick on every now and again and say 'just hang on a second, it is OK making all these statements but where is the money coming from?'. We have got a lot to learn, I do think there is a long way to go.

Great, thanks a lot.

Your welcome! I do hope that was some use to you.

Yes, that is great.

Appendix F	Quotes				
(AL) F	The person that was in charge of the MDC was talking to me about how she was going off on a residential school for the Open University in Cyprus. So my ears pricked up. And I said 'can anybody teach for the Open University?' (laughs) as a joke. And she said 'yes, but you don't necessarily get to go to places like Cyprus, I have been doing it for ten years and I think this is my reward' she said (laughs). Beyond Expectations	I won't say it is a good way, it is an acceptable means of gaining information, standard information, so that you have got quite a body of responses, so that you can actually draw some conclusions from those responses. Data usability	they are taking whatever they are doing and working with it, how the material works for them, whether they are getting sufficient help, whether they are getting enough support from various different factions. Student support	But to actually gain a real understanding you have to go further and talk to people face to face, so that you can support or refute the quantitative evidence. Understanding	Convenience usually comes into it. Convenience
(Influencer) M	I don't go out in an inspectorial way making sure everything is alright, what I see my role as being is to make sure that the systems are in place, to make sure that the right sort of things are being done, and I can be assured that they are being done. Systems	But the core of it is students, and quality and standards, and actually as I say I think they come together because on both sides we are trying to make sure that we have got to make sure the student learning experience is a good one. Standards		it does provide access to higher education in situations where people can't otherwise get it, and that is partly to do with this part-time nature, it is partly to do with the fact that it goes to people who can study it where they haven't got access to bricks and mortar institutions. Accessibility	it forces you to think about the ways in which you teach reflection
(Student-not OU) M	so it was sort of like a slow diet of a full time course, and I thought that might be a bit messy. Diet/chunks	I think it takes, I think you've got to be motivated. I think anybody who even if you join a club or a team or a night school class you've got to be committed to that. You've got to put the effort in. motivation/commitment		but I've had to be more self disciplined. Self-discipline	It doesn't have the self discipline of deciding doing that on a Wednesday night or a Tuesday night. Its easy to decide to do other things. Self-discipline
AL (non-OU) M	Some people see Distance Learning as a panacea, the answer to all their problems Panacea	We are constantly updating our materials Up to date	We've spent a lot of time making sure that people get	a positive learning environment from a high	in some countries like Hong Kong there is a definite concern

			the right support Support	quality institution. Quality	about credentials and where you get them from Credibility
Staff tutor non OU) F	Quality of the materials is equivalent to the teacher	Standardisation of grades as quality standards.	Some of the in-house students want the DE materials. They think they are missing out.	Some countries don't recognise Distance degrees.	It's the intrinsic value and fulfills expectations.
AL (non-OU) F	There is still a colonial element to DE studies particularly in developing countries such as Malaysia where a British degree is seen as better than others.	It is far more expensive to do a Distance Education course with a British university.	I'm quite exacting about purchasing something.	The thing that matters the most is a sense of being communicated with in a way that gives you confidence that the person giving this service really does understand what they are doing.	I prefer a high level of service.
Employer M	Because you are nationwide we get consistency.	All managers coming out with the same qualifications	We let them know when they come to us that they are expected to study as well as work.	Getting what we expect for our money	
Employer M	This is a long working hours culture.	Employees like short sharp course rather than OU courses which require longer term commitment.	Courses provide self-confidence.	Personally I've found tutors very good but colleagues have found it variable.	Teaching feedback is important. Absolutely vital.
(AL) M	Exceed or on a par or below customer expectations.	Convenience, also cost. Expect to pay a premium for something of a higher quality.	Convenience of a location is OK. For example the location at night or the signposting.	The ability to have flexibility in learning.	Each student has knowledge of what method of teaching works best for them.
Designer F	the market force because of the kind of university that we are	So the whole culture really is very geared towards that kind of delivery.	there is so many other institutions around us that you do start to look at other ways of providing new sources.	One of the things this university is very heavily involved in, and is one of the prime motivators is the global university alliance	but none the less because it is online it doesn't really matter where the student exists you know

Student Association 2 F	how can people learn if you are not giving good feedback?	maximising communications between students and tutors, and the university, which is about the way in which tutors communicate with students.	we want the university to see and ensure that every student has the opportunity to feed into an effective course and content and tuition feedback that will be acted on	if you are a new student and you get a bad tutor you might just walk away from the university and the whole concept of distance education. Whereas if you have had a bit of experience and you have had some wonderful tutors, and you suddenly get one that is pretty awful, then you know that that is something worth arguing about.	so that it is not just students have the right to say when they have got an awful tutor. It is also looking at ways in which on a continuous basis the direct feedback of students can be used to assess whether or not the current training, the support given to tutors, actually is it working
(staff tutor) F	I think we mediate process matter and can add some useful input out of our own umbrella experience	we have got to try and achieve common standards, or work towards common standards.	students are getting all sorts of different values out of that, which will be quality to them.	So I think ... students will have almost unique experiences everyone at the kind of range of services that the university provides.	But, I think that is only one part of quality and if you impose it too heavy handily you might actually detract from the experience. Possibly not for the students, but I think definitely for the people who are involved in delivering it, that if you inbitulate them too much then you are kind of ... you can take the kind of sparkle out of it.
Students	I have expanded my knowledge.	The fact that I can choose when I want to study, if I find I have two hours on a day I can use that, not commit to a regular time.	you can slot it around your day rather than having to fit into a schedule.	I think it is partly an over ambitious course, I think it is overly detailed.	keep my minding working and certainly that has been achieved in that we have had to think about the subject material,
(policy dev) M	British Council were aware of the considerable unease of Distance learning provision from the UK to other countries.	The British Council instigated the development of the guidelines.	The guidelines are deeply committed to resource-based model and travelling tutor model.	There are differences of provision. For example the University of Hull send tutors to Kuala Lumpur	Heriot Watt found that the accounting standards for Israel is different to those of US and UK.

						and have no local agent. Give the same lectures and seminars as in own institution.	
(policy dev) F	We had concern about cow boys	We did market research and found 250 organisations use open and distance learning so there was a great demand.	There was a need for recognition.				
(designer) M	We had to develop materials for those who wanted to learn whilst on the job, but that day release was not suitable.	This course was the professional development for lift engineering.	Achieve quality by maintaining control.	Need to establish a personal relationship and the fact that something is fit for the purpose you have.	We have flexibility of submission dates and we use distance education for flexibility.		